MANIFESTA SALVATION.

K.L. Bian
December 2023

Chapter 1: A Ticking Sound

It was the sound of a handheld metronome with a slipping weight, a meager tapping that increased in frequency. Having passed the ledge, a red plastic bead bounded down the stairs, setting off over the wooden steps like a little firecracker, flashing brightly each time it reflected the sunlight. Images were quick to come to mind—dots on a board, ants on a fly.

From the top of the staircase, a scrawny girl was kneeled down on one knee, intently watching the bead as it bounced one last time before rolling to a stop along the baseboard. In her pale hand lay the severed cord of a bracelet with a single bead missing.

"And there it went," she whispered softly, voice unreadable. She stood up, patted down the wrinkles of her raincoat, and walked past the corridor into her room. With stiff motions, she placed the delicate severed bracelet on her nightstand, cautious not to disrupt the line of beads.

It was a hazy afternoon, and it seemed that everything—even her own thoughts—was occurring in slow motion. The girl turned towards the window, from where the sunlight was pouring in. And this sunlight was a dull gray, for everything within her vision was dimmed by the dark sunglasses she wore. They weren't a most typical pair of sunglasses. They were the large bulky type one wore at the dentist, covering nearly half her face. She wore them all day, even when she slept.

"A little won't hurt, will it?" she murmured noncommittally, raising her hand to her face with the slightest air of hesitance, before sliding the sunglasses down her nose a smidgen.

Blinding—her bloodshot eyes instantly widened and then squinted from the sheer brightness, pupils contracting into pinpricks. She drew in a shallow breath, then gradually opened her eyes completely, blinking out the phantom tears her eyes had once been able to produce.

Although the sun was not at the level of her eye, she could see the surfaces it reflected against. The glare of the window glass, the waxed

floorboards. The glare of the plastic beads. She blinked less and less. It seared through her vision, but it didn't hurt very much after a while. It was like standing in fire. Even fire could only hurt for so long.

The girl did not notice the beads of sweat that formed in her palm. Nor did she notice her rapidly-beating heart, which weighed down on her chest like a sack of lead. Her feet wobbled a little, but still she did not avert her eyes.

The sun was meant to wake. The sun was meant to make one feel awake, but at that moment, staring at something so bright in the throes of her nausea, the girl had never felt more asleep. Her toes were uncurled, body swaying slightly.

Then, somehow, during the dreariest day of the summer, during the point in which nothing breathed or blinked, the ceiling air vent sputtered, and out drifted a whisper of a breeze onto the girl's face. Her right eye twitched. Her hand shook as it hovered beside her face, coming closer, a little closer—she instinctively pushed her glasses back up, and in the blink of an eye, her nausea faded and the world became dim once more.

But the bright dots still danced around her eyes, making little drawings and patterns that she followed dizzily. Blue squiggles. Green blobs. Her lips curled up into a subtle smile. A genuine one laced with childish guilt.

Grandma didn't have to know.

Noelle Favre exited her room and headed down the corridor, down all the empty rooms until the very last. Within this nearly-empty mansion, with molding ceilings and peeling wallpaper, there was something both unsettling and comforting. Or, comforting wasn't the right word. More so nostalgic. Nostalgic of a place she had never visited before moving in.

Noelle halted at the very last door, a gothic mahogany one that seemed grander than the others. She knocked four times, then entered, swinging the door open. She was instantly hit by the scent of damp wood and brine.

Raising her voice slightly, Noelle spoke, "Grandma?" The bedsheets shifted into some amorphous shape. She remained there a little longer before continuing, "Grandma, I'm going out." The room was dim and felt strangely claustrophobic despite its large size.

There was some shuffling within the blankets, and all of a sudden a wrinkled hand stuck out the corner of the blanket, holding a strip of paper. Noelle carefully approached the frozen hand, and took the paper. On it was scribbled nearly-illegible writing:

Alright, don't forget your sunglasses.

"Thanks, Grandma," Noelle softly whispered, then placed the piece of paper back on the frozen palm, and walked out of the room, gently shutting the door with a *click*.

Noelle headed down the stairs on the balls of her feet, holding the carved handrail with two hands. The floorboards were always cold, even during the summer. Noelle liked to pretend that the ice underneath the house from winter never melted.

Tip-toeing down the last flight of stairs, she stopped for a moment to squint at the floor. The bead from before was nowhere to be found. Then again, the rickety mansion was full of mouse holes and nooks and crannies. Maybe, Noelle entertained in her head, the bead had found its way to the underbelly of the house, to a floor of sleet and ice.

She eyed the door and its stained-glass window, walking towards it. Her feet on the rotting wood, the air of a still humidity, she watched, from behind the shades, as lights danced across the wall.

***

A fever dream. He must have been feverish. Eyes drooped, sockets sunken and purple—he reached up tentatively, feeling around for something cold. Or something hot. At this point, having reached a certain plane of his sensory, everything blurred together into something of a similar nature.

He could not see. It was not that he was blind, or that his vision had been concealed, but he could not comprehend what he saw. He could not put what he saw into words or thoughts or feelings. From the heavens which tore at its seams to the eager gates of hell, everything, *everything* flickered and flashed and flew and fell before his eyes.

At the surface, the last of the bubbles dissipated.

He sank further down. The air he inhaled was as cool as a minty fragrance, but it burned in his lungs and stung as it mixed with mucus. He closed his eyes, resisting his instinctive urge to gag and choke. This was what he had needed all along. But it seemed that he never reached the bottom, as the water's distorted lighting grew brighter just as quickly as it had grown darker.

Almost forcefully, his head was swung forward as it broke the surface and he gasped for air because now, it hurt. His head throbbed and his eyes were stretched uncharacteristically open, a confused expression coloring his face. There was, too, an unfound pang of disappointment hollow in his chest. He crooked his neck forward to look down at himself.

Despite his waterlogged clothes, despite the shallow waters, he remained afloat, the gentle lull of the ocean wave carrying him. He laid his head back against the water and only stared above, empty-headed and failing to gather his thoughts, failing to remember.

Back and forth. The ocean depth cradled his body in an oscillating trance, guiding the rafts of his arms and legs. Back and forth. His form wavered, unsteady, as he returned home and changed out of his dripping clothing, shivering, but not because he was cold. Back and forth. He swayed in his step beneath the fervid sun, heading towards a hulking structure in the distance. Back and forth. He watched, standing at the far end of an empty classroom, facing a contraption, as its pendulum swung right and left, leading the escapement to bob like a buoy within the ocean.

With each *tick* the weight lowered itself a little more, but too subtly to be noticed by the naked eye. The clock had no hands, no numbers.

"Tell me, Renzo," the professor spoke, stroking his starchy beard while peering up at the contraption, "what is a clock that doesn't tell time?"

"A useless one," the boy replied concisely without an air of hesitation. He had sharp eyes, a tanned complexion with neatly-trimmed bangs running across his forehead. His black hair was tied up into a small ponytail, revealing the silver earrings that glistened with his every movement. There was nothing

of his appearance that could have hinted in the slightest that he had been drowning in the waters that morning.

The professor chuckled a little. “Always so curt and to the point. I might as well have your peers learn from you.”

“Only if they wish to,” Renzo responded coldly. The professor sighed at the usual words, and opted to change the subject.

“You’re attending this year, yes?”

Renzo’s cool composure was briefly interrupted by the surprise that flitted across his face. “Yes, of course.” The Phoenician Academy of Science was a very decent school, likely one of the best for miles.

The professor nodded. “Good. I would hate to bother you, but we have … a transfer student of sorts attending this year—really, I wouldn’t call her a transfer student, given she isn’t even transferring from another school.” Renzo raised an eyebrow, trying to pinpoint where the conversation was heading.

“Anyway,” the professor continued, “she is what I would consider to be an odd case, and it would be well-appreciated if you could help her around.” For once, he stopped stroking his goatee and turned to look Renzo in the eye, “As a matter of fact, I believe she lives on your street. Hand this to her, won’t you?” The professor held out a small pamphlet.

“Yes, sir,” Renzo replied, taking the pamphlet and tucking it into his pocket. “Shall I leave, now?”

“Go ahead,” the professor waved his hand, turning back to look at the clock. Dipping his head, Renzo swiftly exited the classroom, but just as he was about to close the door, he heard the professor speak once more, “And Renzo? Do act a little more casual, won’t you? I wouldn’t want the girl to get the wrong idea about this school.” Without responding, Renzo nodded slightly before closing the door.

It seemed that the moment he shut the door, the entire atmosphere lightened. Professor Lithgow’s classroom was located in the heart of the school with no windows—landlocked, he liked to call it. It wasn’t stuffy per se, but it was, in a way, so isolated that Renzo could never tell what time of

day it was. Or, perhaps it was that clock of his that distorted him so badly. It must have ticked unevenly.

Drawing in a deep breath while scanning a regular clock in the hallway, he promptly walked away towards the side doors of the school. It was nearly one o' clock, and he had told his mother that he would be back by ten. Huffing in mild frustration, Renzo exited the school and looked twice before crossing the street.

From here, near the ocean, he could hear the foghorns that pierced the stagnant air. Port Octavia was widely known as one of the most prominent trading hubs. However, the recent hurricanes had scared all the merchants away, leaving the town far emptier than usual.

Renzo frowned slightly at this realization. Why were there foghorns during this time? Port Octavia had already stocked up and prepared for potential disaster. There weren't supposed to be ships out at this time. The foghorn rang out once more, vibrating the sidewalk. Renzo blinked once, then twice. It was likely one last desperate importation. He moved on.

It was odd for the streets to be empty on a rare sunny day. Then again, it wasn't exactly a pleasant sunny day—it was a little too hot and the clouds looked an unnatural shade of red. Renzo hugged his book bag and hurried past the boarded up shops and around the corner to the neighborhood.

Renzo pulled the pamphlet out of his pocket. It was a typical introductory pamphlet that all the students received. He quickly examined the street. Renzo could not for the life of him remember who his neighbors were. They were probably his classmates.

Grimacing, he looked back down at the pamphlet and flipped it over. In very small writing in the bottom left corner, read *2553*. Renzo sighed in a mixture of relief and exasperation at his lack of observation. Tightly clutching the pamphlet in his left hand, he set off towards the given address, counting each house number he passed by.

He walked on and on until he reached the last house. It was a huge mansion, painted an ugly navy with colorful stained-glass windows, and Renzo was surprised he hadn't noticed it until now. There weren't even

numbers on the house, he had only been able to find it based on the previous house.

He would make it quick. Renzo strode past the creaking gate, up the cobblestone steps and towards the run-down door. He knocked three times against the door, and straightened his posture. The door opened a little too quickly.

Renzo's eyes widened slightly. There stood a short boy—no, girl—with short coffee-colored hair, wearing the most obnoxious pair of sunglasses he had ever seen. They covered her eyebrows, blocking any trace of expression on her. She wore a navy raincoat despite it being an unbearably hot day. An odd case it certainly was.

He hastily regained his composure and greeted, "Nice to meet you. I'm Renzo from the Phoenician Academy, and I was sent to hand you an introductory pamphlet." He held out the pamphlet, which she gingerly took after an awkward beat of silence. He cleared his throat, "School starts next Monday, if you have any questions, the pamphlet should answer them."

The girl looked down at the pamphlet. "Phoenician Academy of Science?" she croaked out, sounding as though she didn't talk frequently.

"Yes?" Renzo answered, raising an eyebrow. He was quite sure this was the right house. His inquiry warranted no response, the girl looking down at her shoes and remaining quiet. From above, the sun beat down on him to the verge of intolerability. Renzo swayed slightly in his step, before clearing his throat, preparing to speak.

However, the automated farewell, for some reason, refused to leave his tongue—it was less so that something was stopping him and more that he felt too *tired* to do it. It took a herculean effort to stay standing beneath the sweating sun, to blink, to see through the black dots that fogged his vision. He peered up above and wondered how much of the sky was on fire, and how much of it was of his own hallucination.

Distantly, Renzo saw the girl follow his gaze and say, "The weather's been odd, hasn't it?" The words were barely audible. Her figure went blurry, warping back and forth. It must have been the sun in his eyes.

Then, the strangest thing occurred. Perhaps it was the erratic ringing in his ears, or the sound of blood pulsing in his skull, but he began to hear the *tick tock* of a clock. Or actually—on second thought, the sound was a little sharper, more so resembling a bead bouncing on a wooden surface. The sound grew quieter, then louder again, then quieter once more. His head throbbed—

"—Are you alright?" Breath hitching, Renzo whipped around to find the girl with her head cocked, staring at him. There was a beat of silence.

"O-of course," Renzo snapped, but the girl didn't flinch. She only stared. Renzo hastily wiped his sweaty hands on the fabric of his book bag, then promptly left. He didn't spare the sky a single glance the entire way back. He didn't hear the door close behind him either.

However, just as he was about to step past the threshold of his house, he heard the foghorn sound again. The window panes within his house rattled. After standing there dumbly for a few seconds, he scowled, then entered the house, slamming the door behind himself. He scurried up the stairs to his bedroom, ignoring his mother's voice.

Renzo threw down his book bag and fell back on his bed, staring at the ceiling. *The weather's been odd, hasn't it?* He scoffed to himself, "Batty, Renzo. You're going batty."

Chapter 2: Recorded

Here and there, I close my eyes,
To travel the plains—to find, to see
an angel that dwells in the land of blue skies,
who shall slash my chains and set me free.

Noelle did not go outside. Like most things she did, it was not for any particular reason. There was nothing stopping her from stepping past the threshold onto the empty street—nothing bothering her, not even the boy's strange reaction to her question. She had simply found no particular reason to do it in the first place, and could not remember why she had wanted to go outside before.

Sitting on the ground in the nearly-empty drawing room, Noelle leaned her back against the wall. The introductory pamphlet was loosely-clenched in her left hand, supported by her knees. The window shades were all tightly shut, and along with the sunglasses, it was difficult to scrounge enough light to decipher the text.

"The Phoenician Academy of Science," she read out loud, words filling the silence. "A student body size of roughly seven hundred." Noelle blinked. "Highly-renowned meteorology division." She scanned through the page to the bottom. "Certified school psychologist."

After staring blankly for a few seconds, Noelle glanced up at the ceiling, then back at the pamphlet. *School psychologist*. There was always to be a reason, wasn't there? If she narrowed her eyes at that thought, no one would have seen anyway.

What would this specific psychologist have … to offer? Surely, they would prescribe her all sorts of maladies and medicines in order to tighten the screws of her brain once more. They would, perhaps, poke around for something material, a physical proof of her invisible disease. At this point, they may as well have replaced her mind, her person, Noelle thought idly. The thoughts she thought at this very moment only added to the fact.

There were some changes in life, Noelle reasoned, that could be predicted. Like going blind. She would simply see nothing but black. At least, that was what Grandma told her. However, there were other changes that were in the beyond—imagination could only reach so far.

Noelle put the pamphlet down and got to her feet. She headed towards the lone bookshelf in the far corner of the room, holding a meager amount of books. Almost completely hidden by the larger books, she slid out an old and worn journal from the edge with care, flipping it to the first page. Thinking normally—what made it so different?

On the first page was a messy scrawl of a young man kneeled down in agony, face buried in his hands. His fingers blocked his pupils, only showing the white of his eyes. Then again, a mad person would never know how a normal person thought in their mind, and vice versa.

Noelle flipped to the second page, revealing a gruesome sketch of a snake eating a snake, eating another snake, continuing in both directions until it went off the page. All the snakes were dead. After all, it was impossible. It was impossible to *imagine* what thinking normally would be like when her imagination itself was the problem.

She turned to the third page and saw no drawing, but a short poem at the top. The atmosphere went an eerie still. Noelle herself stood frozen, not in fear but in something else she could not put her finger on. As she faintly read the poem in her head, something dull twisted in her bruised gut.

A compass with a needle. A wildly spinning needle. It spun and spun, sometimes halting and changing direction, but it spun desperately here, there, everywhere.

Now, she recalled—in blurry detail—the feeling of *longing*. Longing for what, she could not remember. But it was nevertheless a deep, burning longing that made everything seem so much heavier. Too heavy, it was, as it wavered on the tip once, twice, then—falling, everything was *falling*. It fell and fell, but never hit the ground.

She gasped for air in the drawing room, chest rising and falling rapidly. The journal left her grip and landed with a soft *thump* on the floor. The air felt shattered.

It only lasted a second, however. The shattered pieces slowed in their descent as though sinking through a syrup. The feeling too, had also faded before Noelle had had a chance to remember it. And so she stood there stupefied, mouth slightly agape.

In jerky motions, she turned herself towards the window. A ray of light from a gap between the shades hit her eye. The sunglasses blocked it as usual. Nonetheless, she still stood there, watching from afar as she always did.

"It seems," Noelle began shakily, a lopsided smile trembling at her lips, "that desire is the only thing I have not lost."

Wake up.

***

Noelle woke on Monday feeling nothing.

Whatever she had felt in the previous days, even if not as little and meager as it was, had already been forgotten. Human memory wasn't that good. At least, not when it wasn't filed into words, properly placed on a shelf with a standardized description label.

She was lying on her back. With the bulky sunglasses, she could only ever lie down on her back while sleeping. Noelle shifted out of the covers and sat up at the edge of her bed, dangling her bare feet. Facing the window, she saw that it was still dark outside. Not a trace of light to be found, aside from the flickering yellow streetlight, which the damp sidewalk reflected.

Although there were no sounds of people or wind or foghorns, it wasn't exactly silent. It didn't *feel* silent. Perhaps that was due to the whirring of the ventilation fan, which Noelle's ears had grown accustomed to as she slept. Resting her elbows on her knees, she leaned forward to listen, but struggled to distinguish any extra layer of noise.

She sat back up, returning her gaze to the window. There was no particular reason for her to go to school. Nor was there any particular reason for her not to.

But then, from her peripheral vision, Noelle spotted the severed bracelet on her nightstand. Tilting her head towards it very slightly, she looked at it long and hard. The beads stared back.

And so, she dressed herself. She pulled on a black shirt that smelled of mothballs, then a pair of baggy sweats that barely reached her ankles. She retrieved her navy raincoat from the hook on the wall and slid it on with ease. Noelle used the pads of her feet to walk through the house, as it was still early. Downstairs, she hesitated before picking up the leather satchel.

Turning the corner, her heart pounded heavily as she approached the door with the stained glass window. Certainly not from anticipation, for Noelle never anticipated.

One by one, she slipped on her rain boots, ones she had not worn since the beginning of summer. The soles felt cold against her feet. Noelle reached for the handle, wrenching it downwards and stiffly pulling the door open. She was hit with a blast of chilly air, stinging her eyes. Blinking the tears out, Noelle looked outside. The sky had lightened a little—cyan streaks beginning to flood the sky—but the sun had yet to show.

Noelle stepped past the threshold, then closed the door from behind. She blinked. Momentarily, she stood still, hand not having left the handle. Her heart eventually stopped its pounding. It was anticlimactic. But Noelle relished in an anticlimax.

Despite it being a cold day, there wasn't a breeze in the slightest. It was frigid and the air felt solid, but not necessarily suffocating. Noelle set off, hugging her raincoat around her waist. Her gait was odd, almost too stiff or fake, but only noticeable if squinted at hard enough.

It wouldn't have mattered either way. There was no one else on the streets. There was no one in the shops, either. Noelle strolled past each boarded-up shop, stepped over small pieces of trash and debris. It still didn't

feel completely silent. Many people forgot that even after a whale washed up on shore, its husk would still be surrounded by the buzz of flies.

Noelle suddenly stopped in her tracks in the middle of the intersection that was normally bustling with carriages and cargo and traffic. It was a surreal feeling, standing there on the scarred stone road. She tilted her head towards the sky, mouth slightly parted as though she had something to say. She stood there a long while before leaving.

The Phoenician Academy of Science sat at a cliff, hunched over like a vulture, staring into the sea. The building seemed to consist of more glass than brick, spanning nearly as high as a Frauwood tree. Noelle craned her neck.

Without looking away, she subconsciously unclasped her satchel and pulled out the journal. Her other hand fished around her raincoat pocket until it grasped a pencil. At last, Noelle looked down, positioning the journal in her left hand. She flipped to the fourth page, then cleared her throat.

"You know," Noelle said to the building in a quiet voice, "I once heard a story. You reminded me of it. A story about this dollmaker that lived a long, long time ago. He was a skilled craftsman that made the most realistic dolls out of any fabric. Dolls of girls, dolls of mothers, of kings and queens."

Noelle idly sketched a few lines before continuing, occasionally glancing up at the building. "He treasured each and every one of his creations. 'Because of the hard work I put into them,' he always told himself. It made sense, didn't it?

"Then, there came a day when his hand slipped and he snipped off a doll's arm by accident. He felt disappointed, of course, but it was more than just that. He *mourned*. It was then that the dollmaker realized that he not only treasured his dolls, he emphasized with them as well. 'Perhaps because they resemble people so much?' he asked himself. It made sense, didn't it?" Noelle muttered the last line, lowering her eyes. For a minute, she did not talk and only scribbled and erased before scribbling again.

"He quickly forgot about that day. But, you see, as he grew older, his hands grew more and more frail until they struggled to do as much as sewing on a button. The dollmaker's business dwindled as his dolls became less and

less realistic. Then, one day, his dolls were so ugly that he threw them all into the fire, but the moment he did"—Noelle's eyes flashed from underneath her shades—"he regretted it and jumped into the fire himself." At this point, Noelle was scribbling so hard she nearly tore the paper.

"In his dying moments, the dollmaker realized that he treasured his dolls because he thought of them alive." Noelle stopped drawing to look up at the building. "Inanimate objects? Like you." The building stared back at her. Noelle tapped her pencil to her lip and mused, "Can inanimate objects … die? If you were to burn like those dolls, would you die?"

There was a beat of silence before Noelle looked up at the significantly-brighter sky. "Maybe I should go." Noelle snapped the journal shut and tucked it back into her satchel along with the pencil. She clasped the satchel. "Goodbye. Or hello, isn't it?" She walked towards the main entrance, feeling strangely dazed.

***

The Frau Thamar recorded everything she ever said. Every word that left her lips, even the most ordinary of phrases—hellos, goodbyes. She fit them all into a small journal before her death, one the size of her palm, with a purple-dyed fabric cover and inscribed golden letters reading *Ea Verba Sapientis*.

See, the Frau Thamar did not speak often at all. Speaking less gave the words she did say more meaning.

"*I have come to talk to you, for 'tis the time that I am alone once more. I have come to talk to you, for I know that you will never talk back.*" Patrick read the passage aloud beneath the skylight ceiling, words emanating into the empty foyer.

The hood of his cloak cast a shadow upon the solemn but somewhat inquisitive expression he wore. "The Frau Thamar," Patrick pondered out loud, "never had anyone to talk to. She must have lived a very lonely life."

For a while, he continued to contemplate the passage, standing near the entrance of the academy, book open in his palm. He had arrived far before dawn. Not for the purpose of preparation or responsibility. No, it was simply easier to be in the school when no one else was there.

The *Ea Verba Sapientis* was barely tolerated at the Phoenician Academy of Science. Patrick's nomination as the head of the student council had been a massive upset last year. Then again, no one had dared to question Professor Lithgow's judgment. For a moment, Patrick paused his contemplation and looked down at his feet, his tall figure resembling a drooping sunflower.

"Hello."

Patrick flinched and nearly dropped his book. In the process of fumbling with it, his hood slipped off, revealing the disheveled state of his black hair. Clutching the book precariously between his two hands, he looked up with tired eyes to see a small girl standing in front of him.

"H-hello," Patrick echoed weakly. "Is it … already eight?"

The girl shook her head, responding, "I don't know." Rubbing his bleary eyes with his free hand, Patrick peered up at the skylight ceiling. Yes, dawn had cracked, but it did not look completely light yet. The foyer was still quiet, for no one but the girl had arrived.

The girl murmured slightly, "What you just read—can you read it again?" Patrick's head snapped up at the request.

Still startled, he paused before answering, "Well—yes, I suppose so?" When the girl did not say anything, he placed the book back on his palm and flipped to where he had left off. Somewhere roughly in the middle. Patrick coughed awkwardly, clearing his throat. "*I have come to talk to you, for 'tis the time that I am alone once more. I have come to talk to you, for I know that you will never talk back.*"

The girl showed no reaction. That, or he could spot none, given that the sunglasses she wore covered her eyes and eyebrows. To never show any emotion, Patrick mused within his mind, must have been like looking out a window, watching others but never speaking to them.

"I don't think she lived a very lonely life."

Patrick jolted, his train of thought interrupted. He peered down at her, surprised that she had spoken. "Why do you think that?" asked Patrick, furrowing his brow.

The girl curled her lip, a rare thoughtful expression painted on her face, then said, "She had friends, didn't she?" Patrick looked at her for elaboration. "Not living ones. Not dead ones either. Just friends."

There was no sound in the foyer. Patrick turned to the side to stare into empty space, the girl's words echoing within the chambers of his head. *Not living ones. Not dead ones either. Just friends*. Staring too long without blinking—it did not dull his senses, it sharpened them. He felt hyper aware of the tiled floor he stood on, the ropes that bound him to the earth; of the wafting scent of vinegar from the laboratory. Patrick inhaled it all, he inhaled *everything*.

The two of them stood in the foyer for an unknown amount of time. It didn't matter how long, for neither of them cared for it. Perhaps it was when the sky brightened at last and the chatter of students and teachers alike drifted around the main entrance, that Patrick exhaled and returned to his previous state of awareness. It was like rising out of water, the sudden noise hitting him all at once. The foyer was loud, bustling with dozens of voices and conversations. Students were walking past them in the hallway, paying them no attention. It took a moment for him to unfreeze.

Patrick turned to the girl and dipped his head. "Thank you for your insight …"

"Noelle," replied the girl, her face neutral. "And you?"

"Patrick," he offered, "sixth year, head of student council. You're new here?" Noelle nodded, the locks of her hair bobbing above her chin. Patrick smiled a little—though he had been told his smiles looked like he was about to cry. "I think," Patrick began softly, facing Noelle, "you should try making a friend. No one should have to live a lonely life."

Noelle cocked her head at him, looking confused. But before she could ask for elaboration, Patrick had already left, his black cloak billowing behind him.

As he made his way through the hallway, he looked down at the book, still open in his palm, then flipped the page. The next entry was dated a year later.

Chapter 3: The Phoenician

It was a rectangular room, one of its corners cut off by a cylindrical brick structure. Harsh light streamed in through the broad windows, illuminating the walls in an ill shade of bleach. The air was heavily scented with rubbing alcohol, irritating his nostrils and stinging his eyes.

Despite the classroom's large size, all the desks were tightly crammed together in half of the space. The other half was taken up by several stacks of cardboard boxes, one of them hazardously towering over Renzo.

From the inner corner of the room came the impatient tapping of a shoe. "Well?" the woman inquired, glaring at Renzo through her thin-framed spectacles. "Take a seat. Or are you still comparing your height with the boxes?"

"Sorry, ma'am," Renzo muttered, lowering his head and heading towards a desk aligned against the wall. However, just as he was about to sit down, the woman snapped, "Did I say you would be choosing?" Renzo grimaced and turned around, forcing himself to meet her eyes. "The seating chart is taped on the whiteboard," the woman said, then swiftly sat down at her desk, resuming her previous state of business.

Renzo shuffled to the front of the room and glanced at the chart before heading to his assigned seat. It was jammed between two desks, located near the windows. Renzo set down his bag against the chair and took a seat. He pulled out a book.

Within Miss Karpel's classroom, the shelves, tables, and even small portions of the floor were cluttered with jars and vials and various trinkets—something Renzo could deduce from his peripheral vision only. Everything about the classroom seemed half-unpacked, as though Ms. Karpel had been given one day to relocate her classroom. Renzo returned his gaze to the text.

His peers gradually drifted in one by one, each adding more noise until the classroom became a river of chatter. Excited, some of them,

conversing animatedly with each other. Others, pretending not to be. A group of his classmates passed by. A few of them glared slightly in his direction, while the rest ignored him completely. Perhaps, a small voice within Renzo's head suggested, he should learn their names.

Renzo scowled, shutting down that thought. He was no longer paying attention to the text. He paused his reading and placed the book on the desk, spine up, then raised his head, coming face to face with one of his peers.

The boy was tall and lanky, his blonde hair gathered into a ponytail with several strands poking out. He stood there awkwardly in front of Renzo's desk, hands clasped together. Renzo narrowed his eyes. The boy laughed nervously, scratching the back of his neck, then said, "Heh, hello. Remember me?" He spoke with a light accent.

"No." Renzo glared at him coldly. A bead of sweat was apparent on the boy's forehead.

"Well, I'm Kolya, in case you forgot. Which you did—wait, not that I mind," he stuttered, letting out another nervous laugh. "And you're Renzo. Um, we were in the same class, but … well, nice to meet you?" The boy stuck out his quivering hand.

Renzo waited a few seconds before rolling his eyes and taking it. The boy's hands were cold with sweat. They shook a little too long, and it only ended when Renzo let go, looking away awkwardly. He waited for Kolya to leave, but his shadow stayed still. He considered picking up his book again to send a stronger cue, that was, until Kolya took a seat right next to him.

Renzo blinked, then asked politely, "What are you doing?"

"Uh, I was assigned to sit here," replied Kolya, who refused to meet Renzo's eyes and seemed rather interested in a stain on his desk. Renzo forced himself not to grimace. Honestly, he should have known that Miss Karpel wouldn't have left a bubble of empty desks around him.

Meanwhile, Kolya was focused on unpacking with a frightening determination. Upon closer inspection, one would have noticed his quivering hands, and the way his fingers lingered extra long on the zippers to waste time.

At approximately half past eight, there came the ring of a small tin bell from the corner of the classroom. The Phoenician Academy used a system in which all the bells in the building were connected by a cord, from which the janitor pulled on, given that his watch was the most accurate clock.

At the signal, Miss Karpel paused her work and strode to the front of the desks, the boxes behind her. “Good morning, class,” she greeted coolly, looking over them like a hawk. “My name is Amelia Karpel, and I teach Practical Science here at the Phoenician. I hope that you are all aware that I take my job very seriously and will not tolerate anything below full effort from *any* of you.”

Everyone was silent and sitting straight. She continued, “While I will be able to understand mistakes rooted from inexperience, I expect no mistakes in following safety procedures. Are there any questions?” The class remained silent.

Renzo leaned forward, the slightest bit intrigued. Was there something in those boxes? Would they be working with something dangerous? Flammable, perhaps? Though, just as Renzo was about to raise his hand, the door opened, and in walked a student. Everyone’s head simultaneously turned towards the noise.

Renzo glanced once at the student before looking away, pointedly facing the windows, gritting his teeth. Meanwhile, waves of murmurs flowed throughout the classroom as his peers stared. The new arrival stood still, a leather satchel hanging from her shoulder. The children that attempted to see her face only saw their own reflected back.

Miss Karpel cleared her throat, then gently questioned, “Are you here as a student?”

“Yes,” the girl replied, her voice extremely hoarse. Miss Karpel nodded, then pointed her chin towards the only empty seat in the classroom—the one right of Renzo aligned against the window. As she approached, he looked to the side glumly.

Miss Karpel began explaining their first assignment, “Everyone in this classroom is to choose a research topic of some sort, then follow through with

a project that will last this entire semester. There are no restrictions to the topic that you choose, but it must be approved by me." She frowned. "I'll have you all know that very few of my students have been approved on their first attempt. Please use your common sense, and the library is available to everyone for research. You have until Friday."

Amidst the sudden chatter, Miss Karpel began sending pairs of students to the library. Harper and Bora. Adam and Ana, the twins from the Kovac family. Sofronio and Francis.

The girl took a seat at her desk, eyes lingering on the dirty glass of the window before stiffly resting her elbows against it. She appeared as a wooden-carved doll, her movements broken and brittle, features unchanging. Renzo momentarily glimpsed her face. He had heard somewhere, once, that when one looked into the abyss, it looked right back.

Gradually, more and more students filtered out of the classroom. Lara and Adriana. Hilda and Wilburg. At one point or another, Renzo tuned it all out into a background static, staring at the book in his hands but not reading it. And strangely enough, something about it was familiar—how he inhaled a cool breath of air but felt it burn like fire in his lungs.

His watercolored surroundings faded away and he felt himself sinking below the murky surface until he could spot the bottom. He sunk a little more, and his fingertips nearly grazed it—

"—Renzo." His head snapped up to Miss Karpel, who stood in front of his desk, frowning down at him. She narrowed her eyes in annoyance, then asked, "Are you planning on heading to the library at all? Pay attention."

Renzo scanned the classroom from the side of his eye. It was empty, save for himself, Miss Karpel, the girl beside him, and—Kolya? "Well?" inquired Miss Karpel, "choose your partner. If you're left, you'll have to go with me."

Judging by the distasteful expressions on the both of them, that option was a last resort. Renzo's lip curled as he looked to his both sides, settling on the left. Muttering under his breath, he reached out and grabbed Kolya's wrist,

who yelped at the unexpected contact. He dragged the both of them towards the door, sparing not a glance towards Miss Karpel.

***

The light was brown. The musty lampshades—they were brown with years of accumulated dust, but here the dust was welcome. Here, the janitor was told to leave the shelves and tables and lampshades untouched.

They were ten feet below the surface, residing within the school's oversized basement, more commonly referred to as the library. Renzo could recall, from an older text he had skimmed through a while ago, that the school library was originally built to be a bunker during the war.

As a matter of fact, the Phoenician Academy itself was not always a school, but once a safehouse and storage compound of sorts. From a modern perspective, the building structure was an architectural disaster, built on the whim in a blocky fashion, with doors purposefully hidden and blended into the wall. After the war, the entrance had been remodeled into a grand glass structure to overshadow the eyesore behind it.

Renzo guided Kolya across the vast room. Within this library, after descending down a small set of stairs, were rows and rows of bookshelves that stood inches away from the ceiling. The carpet was pleated and frayed from the weight it supported, nails and staples studded in it along the baseboard. It smelled heavily of pine and paper. It smelled of a childhood memory.

Renzo weaved Kolya in and out of a maze of shelves, his eyes downcast with a conflicted mixture of bitterness and fondness. Kolya followed behind him, stumbling and tripping over his own legs. At a certain point, deep enough within the library to satisfy Renzo, he halted in his step and let go of Kolya, who flailed his arms to regain his balance.

Turning around to face him after having vanished the expression, he hummed, "Well? What do you think? Are you fine with this spot?" They were in the geology section, which was empty for the most part. Kolya nodded. "Yes, this is good."

For a minute or so, the two went their separate ways to collect their preferred stack of books. In doing so, the little eagerness Renzo had felt in exploring the library was quickly snuffed out. He wasn't exactly sure what he was looking for, and judging by the number of times he ran into Kolya while wandering around, he didn't either.

What was he to look for, anyway? There must have been *some* restrictions, at the very least. Perhaps, a small voice piped up in his head, the restriction was Miss Karpel herself. Renzo scoffed to himself. From what he could gather, ninety-nine percent of topics would not pass Miss Karpel's judgment. Surely in the past, someone had tried to offer a topic like "puppies," or "mustard."

Renzo began his stroll down a random aisle of shelves. Within ten minutes later, tears were swimming in his eyes after reading the spines of fifty books that appeared to have little to no relation to each other. It seemed that the library took after the building's architectural lack of organization. *The Chemical Structure of Obsidian*, *The Hail Experiment of Harrison City*, *A Guide to the Yellow-Spined Gecko, The Construction of Truster Bridge …*

Yes, they were all *mature* topics Miss Karpel would probably approve of, but Renzo felt no interest in learning them. While he spent most of school learning things he did not wish to learn, it was because he was being forced to do so. Here, no one would force him to learn of yellow-spined geckos or the Truster Bridge. It was funny how, after not being given a choice for a majority of his childhood, he had forgotten how to make them.

Pinching the spine of a worn book in frustration, Renzo trudged back to the geology section carrying a stack of books he knew he would not read. He found Kolya already there with all his books spread out before himself, looking a little lost, unsure of which one to pick first. Renzo cleared his throat.

Kolya, using the common sense he had, did not say anything when he spotted Renzo's sour face. Renzo set his stack of books down onto the floor not very gently, before dropping down next to them.

It was an awfully uncomfortable affair, as each of them snatched a random book from their respective pile and began to read. Renzo may have

been reading the words on the page, but he was not paying attention to them in the slightest. Kolya turned the pages sporadically. His book must have had many pictures.

"If you're going to read," Renzo snapped irritably, "do it properly."

Surprisingly, Kolya shot back defensively, "Well, you don't seem very thrilled at the prospect of reading either." After the realization of his words set in, Kolya's eyes widened and he quickly added, "I-I meant something else—nevermind." Renzo raised an eyebrow, but returned his gaze to his book.

However, rather than reading, he found his eyes lingering at the edge of the page as his grip on the book tightened. Several moments later, he found himself admitting very quietly, perhaps more to himself than Kolya, "You're not completely wrong."

Kolya raised his head in surprise, before his face settled back into an awkward expression, eyes darting around with uncertainty. "Ah."

Renzo eyed the top of the coffee-stained shelf, grip having loosened on the book after the unexpected confession. At this very moment, his eyes had softened around the edges, looking nearly foreign on his face. If he noticed Kolya staring at him curiously, he said nothing.

"What do you mean?" asked Kolya.

"I haven't enjoyed reading in a while." Renzo wasn't very good at telling stories. People told him his stories lacked everything a story should have. His tone turned bitter as he elaborated, "I haven't enjoyed anything in a while." And yet, it wasn't as though anything had changed. His drowsy routine remained, there was no reason for him to long for anything else.

Kolya listened but said nothing. He looked unsure, brow furrowed in thought.

Renzo grimaced before continuing, not quite sure why he was sharing this, "Something happened a few days ago. I'm not really sure what it was. But since then, everything has become dull … in contrast." His eyes went glassy for a moment before they cleared and he scoffed, "What am I babbling about? Nevermind."

Kolya looked away, feeling as though he had intruded. This wasn't for him to see. Really, he wasn't supposed to be here in the first place. Book in his hands all but forgotten, Kolya swallowed the dull lump in his throat, then replied, "It's okay—okay. I see what you mean."

Renzo glared at him. He hated responses like that. Automatic words of sympathy, sorrow, gratefulness, anything of any sort. He was sick of it—he wanted something new, anything in its rawest form. But, who was he to criticize when he himself was no better? His past, present and future—they were written out and had already been written out from the start.

"Do you really?" Renzo whispered, lips barely moving. The stack of books beside him remained untouched.

***

"Sore throat?" Miss Karpel gently slid a glass of water across the desk, leaving a trail of droplets behind. The strands of her graying hair were neatly tied into a bun, her gray coat without a wrinkle in sight.

Noelle accepted the water and took a meager sip before looking up and facing Miss Karpel. "I think I talked too much this morning." The science professor did not ask for elaboration.

"Do you have an idea for the topic you would like to choose?" They were alone in the classroom, the two of them sitting near the middle of the classroom. Somewhere outside the window, a cloud lazily drifted in front of the sun.

"No," Noelle responded bluntly, head tilting forward just enough for Miss Karpel to glimpse her eyebrows. At the moment, they were relaxed, betraying nothing at all. Miss Karpel narrowed her eyes, pursing her lips.

She then asked, "Have you ever been in a science class before?"

"No." Miss Karpel wasn't surprised. She had briefly skimmed through the girl's file that morning, delivered to her by Lithgow. Her mind speeding through what to say next, she crossed her legs and leaned forward, hands clasped.

"I have a proposition for you," began Miss Karpel curtly. "I will make an exception for the topic you choose. I will still require the same amount of effort and time put into it, but I will be more lenient in terms of what your topic will be." Noelle's eyebrows rose a fraction.

She hesitated before speaking, "What do you mean?"

"Well." Miss Karpel glanced down at her fingernails before explaining, "I understand that this school may not provide the proper resources for topics of your interest. In that case, I will allow a rare instance of … self-study. As long as it is not damaging to anyone's health in any way." Noelle tilted her head towards the ceiling, hiding the entirety of her upper face.

"Okay."

Chapter 4: The Wind and Skies

What was a friend, exactly? A friend was supposedly something more than a stranger, perhaps something more than an acquaintance, someone that shared an understanding of some significance. But if everyone's mind worked a little differently, if everyone's perception was a little different, then no one would ever fully understand another, and therefore having a living, thinking friend was impossible.

Having a friend—was that what they had fooled themselves into thinking? Noelle quietly ate a sandwich as she observed the other children from her spot beneath the tree. How they laughed and how they flailed their arms in the midst of telling a story.

Noelle separated the bread from the meat and nibbled at its crust. And she felt nothing at all, watching her classmates play and chatter beneath the hazy sun. Not the slightest drop of resentment or envy or longing. Feeling nothing at all—that was her loneliness. Noelle smiled from underneath her piece of bread, entertaining the train of thought.

Loneliness was not a bad thing, contrary to how they liked to paint it. It was only a different state of mind, a certain state of awareness. Something that allowed her to be a little *too* aware of everything happening, too aware to join them in their dream of living.

Noelle stood up and discarded the remaining sandwich into the trash bin. She reached for her satchel, unclasped it, and pulled out the journal. Brushing it off, she opened it to the fifth page, but rather than writing on it, she neatly tore it out, leaving only a remnant of paper threaded in the spine.

The paper was uneven, some areas thinner than others. Nonetheless, Noelle carefully folded it in half. She creased a triangle into it. Then another, symmetrical to the previous. After five more folds, she adjusted the flaps and held the paper airplane in her palm, looking down on it. It was lightweight and smaller than most paper planes, the edges ripped.

Noelle raised her head, awkwardly positioned her arm, and threw the plane into the air. Within an instant, an erratic gust of wind tipped the nose and the plane dove at the ground a foot away from her.

Face unchanging, Noelle knelt down and picked it back up, then threw it again. This time, it went a little ways before stalling midway and returning to her feet. And so she knelt down.

She threw the plane again and again and again. Sometimes, the plane went a few feet farther. Other times, it took a sharp turn back in her direction. She was waiting. She was waiting for something to happen, for anything to happen. But the plane only dove at the ground time and time again. And so she knelt down, and threw it again.

"Send her back to the nuthouse." From the courtyard came murmurs that only the wind carried.

"I didn't know there were retarded people at the Phoenician." Subtle glances in her direction, their eyes narrowed and fleeting.

"There's a difference between a retard and an attention-seeker. The Phoenician doesn't have retards." One by one, their heads turned away. They returned to their story-telling and talking, their smiles and laughter back as quickly as they had left. They forgot about her.

That was, in Noelle's opinion, the most beautiful part of the human mind. To forget something so quickly, to so easily burn a train of thought before it could continue and cause self-destruction throughout the mind. She stood up, pushed the shades up her nose, and prepared her arm once more.

Lunch hour ended with an empty stomach and half-torn paper plane. Without looking up at the professor, she slid the tape dispenser towards herself and placed the wings back together.

Professor Lithgow watched her with curious eyes, repeatedly clicking his pen against the mahogany desk. Each click of his pen was aligned perfectly with the tick of the clock in the corner of the room, all the while Noelle listened, not sure what she was listening for.

Nobody talked within the classroom. After taping her plane back together, Noelle scoured the room for a seat before settling down, gently

laying the plane on her desk. Renzo was seated two desks in front of her. She did not recognize anyone else.

Resting her chin on her wrist, she waited. And it seemed an eternity, far longer than a passing period should have been, when a shadow passed the door and the tin bell rang out from the upper corner of the classroom. The professor stopped clicking his pen. Everyone seemed to let out a subtle sigh of relief.

"Good afternoon." Professor Lithgow greeted casually, still seated at his desk. He smiled warmly at them. "For most of you, this is your first day in my classroom. For one of you, this is your first day in this school." The class remained silent.

"Anyway," he continued with a chuckle, unbothered by the lack of response, "I will be your teacher for Science Theory. The point of this class is to study the theory behind a concept so that you can apply it through an experiment in Miss Karpel's class."

With a slight groan, the professor lifted himself out of his chair and hobbled towards the blackboard. He grasped a piece of chalk in his right hand, then began, "I personally don't follow a curriculum. I gather all the topics you choose for your semester-long project in Practical Science, then try to prioritize the units to compliment your progress."

On the blackboard, he drew a small sparrow. "I once had a girl that chose birds as her topic," he murmured thoughtfully. "She diagrammed their beaks, wings, feathers, cut them up then put them back together." Professor Lithgow drew the beak of a finch, then the shape of its feather, finishing the last stroke with a flourish before moving on.

"There was another memorable one. A little blonde boy, I think, that studied volcanoes." He drew the jagged lines of a mountain, then a collage of short strokes for trees. "Went as far as taking a trip to Mount Slagston. Came back delirious with half his leg burned off," Professor Lithgow noted casually, as though he were speaking of the weather. The class watched warily.

"And, oh yes," he suddenly lit up, remembering, shifting to the last part of the board. "There was this other boy, and he still attends here. A

sixth-year, if I recall correctly. He chose to study *skies*. And I was skeptical at first, but …" Professor Lithgow trailed off and held the chalk inches away from the last section of the board, on which he had drawn nothing. He left it empty.

"Well," he turned to smile at the class. "I hope that gives you some inspiration. Miss Karpel said you would need it." The students sat still, staring ahead, their fingers twitching.

The professor's eyes drifted around until they landed flat on Noelle. "Were you the one flying paper planes during lunch? Are you perhaps considering choosing flight? I saw you from my classroom, here."

Noelle did not respond and only stared back. The classroom had no windows. "Tough crowd?" Professor Lithgow laughed lightly. "Don't worry, everyone. You'll get used to me and my habits. Renzo over there already has, hasn't he?"

"Sir?" Renzo answered cautiously, looking up.

"Like I said," the professor continued on, facing the class, "you just need to settle down. You just need to get used to the workings. You just need some time." He hobbled back to his seat and smiled to himself as though he had thought of a hilarious joke. The class only watched, and from the corner of the classroom, the clockless clock continued ticking.

***

"Well, what does this project mean to you?" asked his mother, one hand on her hip and the other operating the cash register. Renzo was seated on a rickety stool, legs crossed. He waited for the door to close and the customer's footsteps to disappear before answering.

"It's just another project."

His mother rolled her eyes, "'Another project,' hm? You're sounding more like your father every day." Renzo instantly scowled, but she shushed his protests and added, "Answer me again, what are you looking to get out of it?"

Renzo looked down at his lap, fidgeting with a pair of shears. “I don’t know.” His mother shuffled through the last of the bills and shut the cash register, coins rattling. She straightened the hems of her shawl, then moved on to sorting the razors.

“I haven’t heard you say that in a long time,” she said quietly, back facing him.

Renzo sighed and looked to the side. The barbershop was empty. After school, students now walked straight home in a uniform line, leaving the entire aisle of shops out of business. They were waiting for the storm, the disaster, the foretold catastrophic calamity. It still had yet to come.

“I’m just,” Renzo muttered, feeling exasperated, “I’m … I don’t—I *do* want to do it. I *do* want something out of it.”

“But?” his mother encouraged.

“But, I don’t know why I can’t even, even—”

“Acknowledge it,” his mother finished for him. “You’re afraid to think about it? Why?” Renzo said nothing. His mother could always read him well. Could always say the words he couldn’t. He buried his face in his hands.

He wasn’t quite sure when his mother walked over behind that stool, behind him. She took his hair like she always did, combed it through just lightly enough for him to feel it scraping his scalp. She took a spray bottle and sprayed his hair damp, before combing through it once more. Her fingertips felt cool and grounding.

With her free hand, she nudged the shears out of his hands and used it to trim away a few stray strands of hair, brushing them off his shoulders to the floor. Lastly, she gathered all the hair and tied it into a flawless ponytail, not a strand out of place.

She flicked his head. “You know you’re my good-looking boy, don’t you?”

“Yes, Mama, I know,” he mumbled halfheartedly. From the side of his eye, he glanced out the window at the colorless sky.

***

Wading through a dream. He had to think harder to remember names, faces, the everyday words and actions of his peers. But it was so tempting to close his eyes and sink below the floor of the classroom, through the foundation of rational existence and into the murky depths in which he could nearly touch the bottom.

He had heard somewhere, that pain was better than boredom. That anything was better than nothing. His head rolled to the side, gently hitting the shelf. His eyes were a dull gray.

"You h-haven't read at all," Kolya remarked. His accent bled more than usual, indicating his nervousness. "You need your topic by Friday? That means two days."

At the moment, Renzo was lacking the willpower to feel snappish or upset. He closed his eyes halfway, and visualized a translucent ghost of himself standing up and leaving the geology section. It seemed so easy. But it wasn't until he opened his eyes that he felt the burdensome sack of his bones and flesh tied to the ground. He angled his head towards Kolya. "Have you decided?"

Strangely, Kolya's eyes went a little misty as he replied, "Kind of."

"What is it?" Renzo asked, propping his head against a heavy book, looking at Kolya with the slightest hint of curiosity.

"Well—uh," Kolya coughed, not having expected the attention he was given, "I'm thinking about studying trees. Frauwood trees."

"Trees?" Renzo repeated, forcing himself not to make any assumptions.

Kolya looked away. "Yeah. Uh, my sister always wanted to see one—a Frauwood tree."

"Your family isn't here?"

"They're two oceans away," said Kolya with a small smile on his face. "My Ma, my Da, and my six sisters." He took a deep breath before continuing, "My twin sister, Nadia—she always heard about how tall they were. I'm just here to study."

Renzo looked to the side and adjusted his sitting posture. “Does she know they’re religious trees used in cults?” Kolya let out a quick laugh.

“A tree is a tree. And there’s nothing bad about the Frau Thamar,” said Kolya, sounding more confident than Renzo had ever heard. However, under Renzo’s scrutinizing gaze, he seemed to crumble back into his usual stuttery character. “At least, t-that’s what I’ve seen so far. I might be wrong.”

“No. I was joking,” Renzo responded in a deadpan voice, finding himself having to stifle a smile at the way Kolya’s shoulders relaxed. “Where are you living right now, then?”

“Oh. Uh, with some family friends.” Kolya’s tone dipped a little as he looked down. “I didn’t come here alone. You might actually recognize some of them. Uh, let’s see. Alik, Lazar, Emil?” Renzo wracked his brain, then found his lip curling. From the little he could gather, they weren’t the most pleasant people. Then again, maybe it was a personal grudge from when they made fun of his habits the previous year. “Yeah, I think I know them,” was all he said, crossing his arms.

Kolya bit his lip and scanned his surroundings, before carefully saying, “I don’t like them very much.” He waited one second. Then two. He felt terribly stupid when a wave of relief washed over him as nothing catastrophic unfolded after his few words. Meanwhile, Renzo was looking at him, blinking.

“So you *do* have a spine.”

“Hey!” Kolya protested, feeling a sour and dreadful and warm and bright feeling spread in his stomach. *So you do have a spine.*

“Good luck on your tree project,” Renzo blurted out. To some it may have sounded sarcastic, and in most cases it would have been, but for some peculiar reason, not this time.

“Thank you,” Kolya answered too quickly. “Nadia. Um, she wants me to be a botanist. My Ma, a doctor. My Da, a housewife. He thinks I’m too useless to be anything else.” He scratched the back of his neck in embarrassment.

“You?” Renzo inquired.

Kolya laughed, "Yeah, me. I-I don't know what he expect—"

"No." Renzo rolled his eyes. "I meant, what do *you* want to be?" Kolya fell silent. For a moment or two, their eyes were locked together. And it would have been so easy to look away, to spare himself of the humiliation, to change the subject or flee the geology section altogether.

"A dancer." Kolya waited for a scoff, maybe a round of rolling eyes, a sarcastic comment, perhaps. Maybe, if he was nice enough, he would simply take it as a joke like his father did and wave it off. Maybe, if he was a little nicer than that, he would nod, then place in a yellowed cabinet of forgotten things and move past it. Which meant he was completely unprepared when Renzo said—

"That's nice." His words were quiet but genuine. Kolya's eyes widened for a second. His mouth slightly parted, he leaned against the shelf, looking up. Neither of them spoke for several minutes.

Somewhere, clouding the vision in his eyes, Kolya saw his sister dancing, surrealistically lightweight, in the sky or underwater or within a plain of tall grass or here, on top of the musty bookshelves of the Phoenician library. She wore the gray feathered dress she always did, the one with the small frills and silky hems, but what stood above them all was her *hair*, a sheen of light blonde, nearly white, reflecting the light with each swish of her neck.

"Thanks." There wasn't a quiver in his voice. And for Renzo, something of the absolute air momentarily ceased his worries all at once. He fantasized a small tune—he was not sure what to make of it, but upon listening from far away, everything suddenly appeared meager and insignificant. Renzo closed his eyes. It was a pretty song while it lasted.

It could have been best described as rising from submersion, for Renzo felt it wake slowly—as the period ended and he left the library, lightheaded, heading up the stairs to the main building where the stark daylight flowed in through segments. He didn't exactly hear the noise or the conversations of the people he passed by, nor taste the corned beef sandwich he ate for lunch. He briefly recalled having been hit in the head with a stray paper plane, but had not bothered to find who threw it.

He rubbed his eyes, yawning. The crisp ticking noise growing louder within his skull, he walked in front of the girl's desk and waited. He didn't have much time to consider the irony of the situation, for he was too focused on too many other things.

"Hello," she acknowledged dully, turning towards him.

Renzo stared at his own reflection in her sunglasses, a copy of himself wearing a dazed and dreamy expression he could not recognize, then said, "Hello."

He could not tell whether the ticking noise was within his head or outside it—or both. But it changed in volume and vibrance like a turntable needle on a bumpy surface, as he felt his lips move and say, "The weather's been odd."

"Yes," the girl responded, "it has." It wouldn't have mattered whether or not she wore sunglasses. If she were to take them off, and he would peer into what they called the windows of one's soul, would he find anything at all? He turned and walked away.

Renzo slumped into his seat, his eyes unfocused and facing downwards. He felt as though he could hear everything and nothing, all at once. Really, it wasn't as though the burden on his shoulders had been removed, it was more so that gravity itself had changed directions without him, leaving him behind within a consciousness of contradictions.

And Renzo, for once, shed his facade of a diligent student and spent the period doing nothing in particular, his swirling eyes wavering but never shutting, as though he were afraid he would miss it all. Mr. Lithgow watched curiously, but made no remark.

The following morning, Miss Karpel strode up to him, inspecting him through her sharp eyes, and asked, "Have you chosen a topic?" She sounded neither irate nor concerned, only judging. She was waiting. She was waiting, wasn't she?

"Yes," Renzo returned, but without his usual sharp tone. "I'd like to choose"—he heard the snip of a pair of shears—"hurricanes." For a moment, Miss Karpel did not say anything as she processed his words.

Then, she nodded very slightly. “I see. I will connect you with the head of the meteorology division, Patrick, a sixth year. You will start after your research.” With that, she whipped around and headed to the next student. Renzo remained in his seat, unsure of how he was supposed to feel. All of this, rooting from something silly in his head, something superstitious and imaginary. From a young age, he had striven to be the human epitome of rationality. Yet, as of late, rationality had been feeling less like a science and more like another superstition.

***

Someone had left the window open. Specifically, the window next to where Noelle sat. And because the window’s locking mechanism was old, old enough to be crusted with something more than rust, no one had been able to shut it.

What was left was a thin mesh, fraying in patches by the passing day, and if Noelle were to squint hard enough, it would become invisible.

She redirected her attention to the journal that sat in front of her. The ragged and unassuming thing, some pages sticking together and others thinner than a Frauwood leaf due to past waterlogged exertions, was perhaps the last thing holding the sinews of her reality together. For that, it held no value in anyone’s eyes except her own.

And through this journal, she was to achieve “order,” as Miss Karpel had told her the previous day after school. But how could “order” be achieved through a journal that recorded everything and nothing? There was no pattern, no progression, nothing that could even vaguely resemble what they were looking for. It was only a story, within a story, within a story. Noelle reached out and opened it.

On the sixth page of the journal—including the one that had been ripped out—Noelle wrote at the upper left corner: *Friday, September 17, Year 5401*. She stared down at what she had written solemnly. She was not

supposed to care, not supposed to resist. But how, specifically, was one supposed to go about doing that?

Only Miss Karpel was in the classroom, sorting through papers and unpacking the boxes that had been sitting collecting dust for the majority of the week. Once again, everyone was in the library, and Noelle was left alone at her desk, thinking.

She turned away from the journal and faced the window once more, and squinted until the mesh disappeared. She saw a nearly empty sky. A sky with one cloud in it, so far away that it could have passed as a speck in her vision. The cloud was the shade of a pale lead, lacerated at its edges.

But then her pupils focused and the mesh appeared in front of her, effectively blocking out her view of the sky. Noelle gripped the ledge tightly. She squinted more, so much that the space left open was taken up by her lashes. “Here and there, I close my eyes.”

The little cloud hovered weakly in her vision. And when Noelle closed her eyes, she still saw it, before losing it in a sea of black. Noelle gripped the ledge until her knuckles turned white. “To travel the plains—to find, to see.” She searched desperately, eyeballs moving within her closed eyelids, until—there! She spotted the speck of the cloud, floating aimlessly around.

And when she shut her eyes a little tighter, when her pupils seemed to focus within her closed eyes, when a nonexistent ray of light hit it just right, the cloud’s lacerated edges defined themselves into something more than a cloud, appearing in the form of a girl. “An angel that dwells in the land of blue skies.”

The girl—her white silhouette was there for a split second before vanishing. Noelle’s eyes shot open, but as she fruitlessly searched and searched, all she could see was mesh. “Who shall slash my chains and set me free.”

Noelle sat there and stared, stunned, as her classmates trickled back into the classroom. Was the period already coming to a close? Before Renzo could pass her desk, in a jerky movement, she instinctively shot out an arm and stopped him. He halted and looked at her, questioning.

"I have a question," she said. "What does it mean to remember something you've never seen before?" The rest of the class was silent, never having heard her speak past three words, much less without a hoarse throat.

Renzo answered slowly, "Are you … talking about deja vu? I'm not sure, but some people say it happens when the brain falsely records a memory, or more commonly, when you see something similar to something you've seen in a dream before."

Noelle looked up. "Dreaming, you say?"

Chapter 5: Dreaming, you say?

Her vision was tinted warmer than usual. Perhaps that was, like most things that happened to her, a consequence of staring at the sun too often.

Despite that singular detail, everything was eerily clear. The sky was a brilliant shade of blue, portraying the place in such a way that, for only a moment, Noelle held a notion that everything that ever happened here happened *right*. Surrounding her were endless plains of dry grass that reached no higher than her knees, save for the barren strip of land in front of her. A road?

"The bus isn't coming, you know." Noelle flinched and whipped her head to the right to see a girl standing right beside her, having just spoken. She was around her own age, but possessed some unknown ethereal beauty—like an angel, snow-white hair cascading down her shoulders and a gaze so soft it looked as though it had been painted.

"Who are you?" Noelle asked, not in an unkind tone.

The girl smiled into the sleeve of her blouse, her eyes filled with a mixture of amusement and mirth, before replying, "Did you hit your head again, silly?" Without answering her question, she reached out, clasping their hands together. "C'mon, let's go. We can find something better to do." She dragged her backwards away from the road, startling a yelp out of Noelle.

Noelle followed her hand-in-hand as they stumbled through the plain of grass, leaving a noticeable trail behind them. But there was no farmer there to reprimand them, no approaching tractor to be found. Noelle's breath grew shallow from running, repeatedly tripping over studs and roots, but the girl did not slow.

Above them, the sun seemed encased in resin, unmoving but providing a pleasant warmth. However, there were no songbirds, no chirping of crickets, nothing aside from the sound of rustling grass and heavy breathing. It was not something Noelle noticed until much later.

At last, the girl halted in her step in the middle of the field. She, unlike Noelle, was not out of breath in the slightest. She beamed at her, waiting. "Well?"

Noelle blinked once, then twice. She waited for an elaboration of sorts, but the girl only smiled at her expectantly. And so the two of them stood there, beneath the still sun that never set, the sun that never grew brighter or dimmer. To a standard person, it would have been strange to stare at someone else for that long, but Noelle had never had a good sense of time in the first place.

Then, very slowly, her hand twitched above her raincoat pocket, then reached in and felt paper. She carefully pulled out the paper plane, looking down at it, then back up at the girl. She backed away from the girl, until they were a few feet apart. Noelle raised her arm, hesitated, then threw the plane.

It did not fall, nor crash, nor change direction. It glided seamlessly through the air, all the way up until the girl caught it. The girl's beam brightened, before she raised her arm in return and threw it back, flying flawlessly as before. Noelle's eyes widened as she stumbled slightly, leaning forward, to catch it, clapping it between her two palms.

Letting out a small breath, she looked up at the girl, cocked her head, then threw it again. The girl caught it, then threw it back. Noelle did the same. And she did not count how many times the plane went back and forth between them, before she let out an abrupt bubbly laugh.

The laugh was tinkling and childish, and very much uncharacteristic of Noelle. The laugh did not match her sullen face, nor her dull demeanor in the slightest. But she laughed again, and again, knowing that no adult would ever hear it, no classmate would either, no one would in these faraway plains.

At one point or another, the girl started giggling too, and before long the two of them were doubled over in laughter. Something about it felt horribly unnatural, their collected cackles in the raw air, but Noelle could not stop herself. She felt lightheaded and dizzy, and all she could do was spin around in a devil's dance with the girl, until both their knees buckled and they fell to the grass in a heap.

Lying down next to her, the girl was grinning, one eye closed and the other squinted at the sun. “See?” she whispered softly to Noelle. “There are many things to do here. There are many *better* things to do here.”

Noelle’s eyes were gently shut, her head resting against a pillow of flattened grass. She opened them to stare at the sky. And in that moment, the sun seemed to shine brighter than ever, possessing her soul and mind like a moth to a flame. Because at that particular moment, she was not wearing her sunglasses.

***

Noelle woke feeling a strange exhilaration, one akin to soaring through the sky, and that by itself was so jarring that she immediately hobbled to the washroom and heaved into the toilet. But even the burning sensation in her throat could not overwhelm the thrill in her veins.

Wiping her mouth, Noelle quickly headed back into her bedroom, pulled out the journal from her raincoat pocket, and began writing on the sixth page. However, no matter how hard she tried, the words she wrote were garbled without form or sense, a desperate attempt to retrieve as much of the water flowing down the drain. *Longing. But longing for what?*

When the last of it was gone, when there was nothing left flowing in her veins, Noelle began to doubt that she had felt anything at all. She was not aware her fingernails were digging into her palms until she released them. That was odd. She had not done it out of frustration. Noelle was never frustrated.

Laying back down on her bed, she waited for the black dots in her vision to clear. But they never did. It wasn’t until much later, that she realized her vision was supposed to be of that dimness. And just by thinking of that, she suddenly noticed the uncomfortable weight of the sunglasses on her nose. Noelle brought her hands to her face, resisting the urge to claw at her skin.

She had to stop thinking. She had to cut off this train of thought before it would self-destruct upon her as a whole. She had already been through it

once. Would her body, or mind, be able to take it twice? Noelle carefully kept her mind blank without an answer.

Ignoring the vile taste of vomit in her mouth, she returned to the journal. On the sixth page, in the upper left corner, she erased and rewrote: *The night of Friday, September 17, Year 5401*. Beneath the date, she spent several minutes rearranging the garbled words into coherent sentences.

Afterwards, the entry was ordinary. It was understandable, but hardly did anything to properly portray the exhilaration she had felt. It simplified the occurrence into mechanical sentences, made the entire occurrence read like a silly fever dream. Distantly, Noelle pondered that even if she had not already forgotten the feeling, would any combination of letters ever manage to resemble it?

At midday, when her stomach began to growl, she headed downstairs and pulled from a rusty cabinet a can of lentils, wedging the lid open with a knife. Pouring the lentils into a small pot, she boiled it lukewarm. At a grimy table, she ate directly from the pot with a small fork.

Noelle glanced back at the cabinet. Five-hundred cans left. Roughly thirty weeks until shopping. She looked back at her bowl and continued eating.

Upon finishing and placing the dirty bowl within the sink atop ten others, having precariously wedged the ceramics against the surrounding rim, Noelle peered out the window, staring silently. And there it was again!—the dull gnawing within her for a yearning she could not name. Something prickled at the back of her neck, reminding her of a heavy presence, retracing back up the stairs and behind the closed mahogany doors.

Grandma didn't have to know.

Feeling her lip curl into a childish smile, she zipped her raincoat and silently padded down the hallway towards the door, leaving her satchel and journal behind. Sliding on her boots, she slipped out the door, shut it, then headed down the empty streets of the neighborhood.

She walked past the alley of shops, past the abandoned vendors and shacks, past the Phoenician Academy. And as no more than a shrinking silhouette in the sun's glare, she left Port Octavia. The stone roads became dirt

roads which soon became no roads at all. In a brief moment of precaution, she looked back over her shoulder, feeling not the weight of a ghost trailing behind her.

And there was always something both comforting and bitter about being alone, an odd pain that she craved and allowed herself to crave, without the presence 0f those that had left her behind. Or perhaps, it was the other way around. One who was left behind was one who no longer wanted to keep up in the first place.

Noelle carefully stepped down the uneven slabs of rock, foot by foot, all the while holding on above, the rocky surface digging into the unblemished skin of hands. The sun stared her down as wind whipped the locks of her hair over her eyes. At the last step, Noelle leapt down and stumbled in her step before sitting back and removing her boots and socks. She placed them aside, looking down.

Her pale bare foot touched the sand, then instantly recoiled. She had not expected it to be that hot. Nonetheless, she slowly placed her entire foot down, feeling it set ablaze. Noelle put her other foot down, waiting for the sensation of fire cascading throughout her lower body to set in. It wasn't a poor replacement. It wasn't a poor replacement at all. Smiling slightly, she steadied herself, then began treading down the beach.

The blood-red veins of her eyes cast a delicate web of shadows across her vision, and as Noelle tilted her head up towards the golden sun, the shapes formed in between resembled something very familiar. Gold lettering, was it? Yes, there could have been a thousand things to long for, and a thousand more to desire, but to find order was to find recurrence.

"I'd like a friend," mused Noelle out loud, her voice drowned away by the ocean waves. As she walked, the little twigs and glass shards that littered the sand dug into her feet. "If people want friends, then I do too."

Noelle thought of the Phoenician and her twenty peers. Twenty jars on a shelf, each with a written label, each with something to offer. And she was free to choose any. She was free to choose, as long as she offered a label of her own.

But there was no need to choose, was there? Noelle thought of The Frau Thamar. A veil atop a faceless form and long sleeves that dripped with gold. Feet binded in black lace, steps soft but definite against stone. There was something enamoring about her, or rather imagining her. Noelle's eye twitched. She was getting closer, wasn't she?

Stopping in her tracks and closing her eyes, she visualized a sky on fire. A sun that burned away any and all life, a sun that burned away the faces of everyone she knew, their voices and the way they walked and ran, and left nothing but silence. From there, from that point in time that would never *need* to exist, she would have a friend, the friend that she longed for.

Unaware of the crazed grin on her face, Noelle thrust her feet into the sand, seeking more of the burning sensation. And for a split moment, everything around her blazed in a bonfire of finality, an ordered chaos. In her ear, and her ear only, she heard the *tick* of a bead, then the *tick* of a clock, then the *tick* of a bead, and the *tick* of a clock once again.

"The only friend I need," Noelle said, "is right here." She tapped her temple. Her eyes glittered with joy.

***

A little vial of crushed crystals, appearing a translucent blue. And it seemed that, no matter the angle she held it at, they would glimmer like stars in the sky. It was Neptune. It was Pluto. It was enrapturing in a way that defied logistics and rationality. Miss Karpel eyed it warily, the fragile object supported stably between her two hands.

Then, there came the sound of footsteps down the hallway, and she hastily wedged it back into its bundle of cotton, gently placing it in one of the many cardboard boxes.

"Good morning, Amelia." The shadow revealed itself in the form of Professor Lithgow, who shuffled into view at the threshold, wearing his signature unsettling smile. Miss Karpel's lip tightened, but she nodded curtly in acknowledgement.

"Likewise, Lithgow. How may I help you?" she inquired.

Professor Lithgow chuckled, "Always so cold, always so straightforward. You do remind me of one of my students—or ours, excuse me." He continued on, waving a hand in the air, "Anyway, let me be brief and I'll be out of here very soon. I've come for a small favor. May you lend me the keys to the specimen storage room?"

Miss Karpel's eyes narrowed. "For what, specifically, if I may ask?"

"Why," he responded casually, "I am only there to visit. I will not tamper with anything, and I will not leave with anything more than satiated curiosity." A vague answer as always, but that was simply the way the professor spoke.

Feeling an unreasonable sense of dread, Miss Karpel reached inside her cabinet, pulled out a large brass key, and handed it to Professor Lithgow, who then tucked it into his pocket with a grateful smile. "Thank you, Amelia." With that, he was off, his footsteps fading out the door and down the hallway. She stood there, watching for a long while, the cold touch of the key still lingering on her fingers.

Listening to confirm that no other person was present, she turned away and strode to her desk, a cluttered pile of papers splayed all across to hide the ones below. Miss Karpel slipped two files out from underneath, holding up the first to read. It was a shipping order, crumpled and folded into quarters. Written in fading ink, the anticipated arrival date read to have been months ago.

At her desk, the science professor took a seat and swiftly pulled out a separate piece of stationary, scribbling a brief letter onto it before tucking it into an envelope along with the shipping order. Sealing the package, she placed it at the corner of her desk as a reminder. Miss Karpel redirected her attention to the second sheet of paper

It was an identification file. Specifically, a student identification file that had been delivered to her shortly before the start of the school year. Noelle Favre—a mental case with severely-lacking medical records, but too young and too harmless to be placed in an asylum. From a faraway distance, the sheet

would have appeared blank from the meager amount of information it contained.

Miss Karpel pursed her lips, and although she already knew the file by heart, she scanned over it once more before returning it to its portfolio. She must have been checking it incessantly. But it nagged at her mind without rest—it was an anomaly, an unanswered question. The girl was not here to learn. The science professor had known that from the very start, and that fact by itself had not been anything worth hiding. However, there came a sinking suspicion that her colleague knew an ample more, and the thought of being omitted knowledge bothered her more than it should have.

Yes, she was very aware she had been thinking about it incessantly. A little more and she would have been prompted to take action. Miss Karpel huffed, proceeding to discard the thought from her head entirely as she pulled out a large stack of pamphlets from a cabinet. What she needed was a distraction. Or, from another perspective, lack thereof.

Counting twenty-one, Miss Karpel prepared the stack at the empty corner of her desk. On the front cover of the pamphlet, printed in black bold letters, read *Science Safety 101*.

***

A streak of elation. Revelation was a wondrous sensation, something Noelle found more addicting than any drug or narcotic. A colorless smoke in the air—one that only she could breath, and from the way her eyes glistened with euphoria, she was caught in a haze of it.

Wherever she went, following the smoke, was followed by the leery eyes of her peers. She could feel their distrustful stares bore into her back, could sense the suspicion in their eyes from far away. Today, however, they seemed especially unnerved—tracing back to what should have been a hollow, expressionless face, but bore an overly-hysterical smile.

From another view, it could have been perceived as a childish grin, but on a face with no eyes or other expression, it must have looked very, very wrong to them.

For several days—or weeks, it was difficult to tell—she hardly paid attention in class, for she could not hear what they lectured or see what they taught. The smoke, although colorless in the air, was not colorless in her eyes.

Ever so occasionally, a wispy tunnel would clear, rooting from the heavy disappointment in Miss Karpel's eyes. But it bothered Noelle little to none, for moments like these were too brief to record, at least when she took care to make them that way.

When she strolled down the hallways, she did not feel the weight of the journal in her satchel, for she had stopped bringing it. In a way, it was dreamlike, the way she drifted around as a ghost without a thought wearing her down. There was never a need to *think* in a dream. Dreams did not matter, because dreams were meant to be forgotten.

This daze was briefly interrupted as she felt herself collide into someone. Startled, she blinked, the grin leaving her lips. Her vision momentarily cleared, and she looked ahead to see a black cloak hunched over and two hands barely keeping a purple book above the floor.

"I'm so sorry!" cried Patrick, before he looked up and his eyes widened more. "Oh! H-hello. I'm sorry this is how we meet again." Noelle's mind was still partially caught in a haze, and she did not say anything, but rather sidestepped to allow her rushing peers pass by.

Patrick, standing up and brushing himself down, looked down at her. "How have you been?" She had not yet had enough time to stew in her wake, to process what was happening, and therefore said nothing, looking down. He only seemed confused, before asking, "Are you alright?"

The euphoric sensation had been washed away entirely. She felt horribly awake and aware, and, rationally, there was nothing wrong at all—but what good was rationality to someone like her? Distantly, in her head, she heard the hacking of a pile of rusted chains as they rose and clattered to the ground.

Something dead and nauseating rose within her chest, and it was less of the sensation and more of her reaction to it that infuriated her. A reaction of confusion? Noelle was never confused. She spent her days doing nothing and thinking nothing, and a mind that could not think most certainly could not feel. Yet, like a spreading wildfire, the foreign sensation seized her and she felt her vision turn warm and uncomfortable.

Inexplicably, tears pricked at her eyes.

"Are you okay?" Patrick sounded earnest, worried. But then, from the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of the open purple book in his hand, instinctively reading the short passage at the top of the page. Patrick shut the book to divert his full attention to her, but still she stared at the book cover, the gold letters embedding themselves into her vision before she could tear her eyes away.

One blink. Two blinks. Noelle walked past Patrick without sparing a glance, joining the flowing river of students until she was sure the purple book had left her realm of vision.

The smoke. Where was it? She had never before felt drawn to anything of this extent, and the need—the cutting need too physically painful to be imaginary—for anything at all felt both right and wrong. She did not feel. She did, however, desire. But to desire and to feel and two very different things.

Something alive, Noelle desperately reasoned in her head as she paced down the hallway, something that could feel, was something unstable. Something that only desired, though, was nothing more than an empty expanse—a gaping maw that could only hunger and consume. Therefore, to desire was to never change. She had not changed.

However, the reassurance did little to soothe her heart, and Noelle felt herself growing more irritable by the minute as it itched and clawed at her from within. Noelle headed out the Phoenician's backdoor to the lunch area, where her peers had already begun eating.

She had no appetite, but even less so than usual. The mere thought of eating repulsed her, whereas before she just would not have cared for it in the

first place. A small voice rang out in her mind, momentarily disrupting the nausea—*she wasn't supposed to resist, was she?* Then, with great clarity Noelle recalled her core principle. To do nothing was to do absolutely nothing at all, including resisting the act of doing something. She swallowed the little lump in her throat.

Noelle stiffly walked to the lunch distributor, and within any acknowledgement took a sandwich for herself, heading to a spot beneath a tree. She ate it with two hands whilst standing, chewing mechanically. It tasted of nothing at all.

After discarding the trash, she returned to the shaded side of the courtyard, standing oddly, feeling as though she were being observed. The grass tickled at her feet, and a mild breeze ran through the locks of her hair. As though a veil had been draped over her head past her feet, the surrounding chatter reduced in volume. The colors around her dimmed—the radiant red hair of Ana Kovac, the rich purple wildflowers that lined the fence, even the glass structure of Phoenician seemed to reflect less light.

And, all that was left to focus on was the unbalance in her stance—the weight at the side of her hip. Noelle, furrowing her forehead in confusion, felt sure that she had left her journal at home. She was sure, as well, that she had left the satchel at home. Her right hand unsteadily traced along her side, and when it slid over her hip, covered by the raincoat, she heard paper wrinkle.

"Ah." Slipping her hand into her raincoat pocket, she reached in and pulled out the paper plane. Perhaps, if she had been thinking more clearly, she would have come to the conclusion that a paper plane would not have affected her balance in the slightest. The forgotten and neglected thing was found bent and torn in a multitude of areas. Physically speaking, it was impossible for it to hover at all, much less fly forward. Yet, Noelle still adjusted the flaps and straightened the tip, preparing it for flight.

Few and meager spectators gathered in mild interest, giggling into their sleeves, amusement dancing in their eyes. Noelle paid them no heed, her attention fixated on the plane, looked straight forward, and with a swift flick, threw the plane.

And as everyone fell silent—how it soared! It flew flawlessly as if being dragged by the thin thread, swerving slightly to the right. The plane saw no resistance to an unnatural degree, gliding over picnic tables and brambles and trees. How high it went, how high it flew! *Far*, far, above. Noelle felt giddy, hands shaking slightly as they lowered back to her sides. A great distance away, the plane seemed to pause, stalling midair to signal the end of its flight.

However, just then, a mild breeze shuffled by, angled at the wings so very precisely that the plane circled around and flew straight back to Noelle. Her head craned towards the heavens, she watched, eyes watering behind the shades, as it descended towards her, little flecks of dust swirling about the tips of the wings, refracting the light. Leaning forward, she clapped the plane between her quivering hands, and at once the breeze paused.

The courtyard was silent. Billowing at her feet was a colorless smoke, rising at a moderate pace.

Two hundred feet away, in the heart of the Phoenician Academy, the pendulum of a clock stuttered slightly. The breeze returned. Noelle looked downwards, watching as the smoke blew past her ankles, carried by the little breeze. She twitched.

All of a sudden, several students shrieked as Noelle made a rapid run towards the fence. She slipped past the ajar gate, ignoring the shouts of administrators behind her. She ran and ran, laughing loudly as the wind ran through her locks, light and free. She followed the smoke through thickets and brambles, between the spindly branches of Frauwood trees, down the sidewalk of the street. Her breath grew shallow, but still she ran. The little particles of dust refracting the light made the smoke almost appear as wisps of white hair. She reached out to touch it, but it was always an inch ahead.

Her laugh was raw and painful to laugh. They had probably all heard. They had probably all heard her laugh, and seen her smile, but it mattered not for she was not aware of it at the moment. Noelle planned to never be aware. Because, in her little world, in her little perception of the world—

"*The only things that exist are those that I believe to exist*," Noelle thought to herself, her face stretched in a grin. Yes, it did not matter where she had read those words. It did not matter who had said those words. The purple book did not exist, and neither did Patrick or Renzo or Miss Karpel or the rest of the school.

If man could hallucinate his ideal world, trick his ears into hearing music, and forget the hunger in his stomach, then man could live a short life of fulfillment.

From above, the sun scorched at the edges of Noelle's vision. She ran along the harbor, the flash of the lapping waves attracting her attention, and upon finding an ideal point, she halted. However, before she could go through with the execution of her actions, she recognized a presence behind her.

Noelle peered back, and spotted the faint tip of the Phoenician looming amongst an expanse of trees and concrete buildings. Her eyes crinkled slightly in sorrow. "I wish I weren't alive. I wish I weren't dead, either. But I can only settle on the latter."

She turned back to face the water. Merely looking at it, its inviting glimmer and blinking pattern, made her drowsy. An eternal sleep. An eternal life in which her mind would dominate and decide, and she would find the friend it had written for her. The smoke reached just below her waist. She stepped forward.

Yet, for a moment, a thought flitted across her mind, and Noelle found herself reconsidering. What she planned to do—did it fall within the lines of her principle? A thought-out decision and its execution was the act of doing something, but for the sake of guaranteeing doing nothing at all afterwards. A trickle of doubt entered her train of thought.

But surely, it was quite impossible to do nothing at all before her planned execution. If the resistance of doing something counted as the act of doing *something*, then what didn't? Within her mind, Noelle treaded fearfully upon this unfamiliar domain. What if, her core principle was nothing but of an illusion? What if, the Frau Thamar words and every other letter within it was

nothing but an *idea* she had dedicated her life and soul to? She shuddered, immediately pausing her spiral.

Furrowing her brow, for several minutes, she stood still at the harbor, dangerously near the edge of the wooden plank. Noelle contemplated, her mind working furiously, and her attempt to ease her doubts only sprouted more of them. At one instance, she considered the possibility that there was no eternal sleep. A possibility in which all her past endeavors would prove to be fruitless. The thought shouldn't have nagged her to this extent—because why did it matter? She had nothing to lose, she was at the end of her line. Yet, mind and rationality did not agree in tandem.

She must have stood there for a long while, for the next time she peered up, the sun had significantly lowered within the sky. Slightly panicked, Noelle paused her thinking. This wouldn't do. This wouldn't do, at all. For some reason, she had had an odd notion that the sun would not move at all.

Noelle stumbled forward, an inch away from the edge, and completely unprepared, she tumbled over the plank, falling forward and into the water within the span of blink. The *splash* was quiet, certainly quieter than it should have been accounting for the size of a young girl. And, after less than a minute, the foam recollected and the girl had vanished entirely from the harbor.

Noelle was still half-caught in a state of panic as she sank, all the while a dull corner of her mind actively rejoiced in this success. Yet, there was nothing at all to celebrate, thought Noelle solemnly. Even if the execution had succeeded, it signified her condemnation of eternal sleep and nothing more. She was to feel nothing of it, as the entire purpose of an eternal sleep was to feel nothing.

She inhaled a breath and instantly regretted it, fire blooming in her stomach. How it burned and stung, no relief to be found, and despite how much it hurt, she could not refrain from taking another one. What a horrible, horrible way to fall asleep, thought Noelle, as she took another breath, and another, sinking further down.

Noelle was very much aware of her masochistic tendencies, of the ill pleasure she derived from matches and scalding tea, but this particular sensation that filled her nostrils and lungs—she despised it with her every being. She took another breath, then two more. Noelle vaguely spotted the blurry silhouette of her hands above her, clawing at the water. What a horrible, horrible passage to eternal sleep.

It was nearly a relief when she felt two hands grab her wrists, heaving her up diagonally in the water. They desperately pulled and pulled, but her waterlogged garments dragged downwards with great weight, and Noelle, on the brink of blacking out, was unsure of what to do.

She had come so far, suffered through years of monotonous living, obeyed her given punishments, and now she had nearly reached the end. There was no reason for her to stay awake any longer. She only needed a little more. Yet, even as she rationalized these thoughts, something within her body overrode her control, perhaps a primal instinct for survival, and through several panicked thrusts of her legs, the hands heaved her up as she broke through the surface.

It hurt to gasp for air, each breath shuddering all throughout her frame. She was grabbed by her arms and painfully dragged ashore, dripping onto the planks, shakily supported by her hands and knees like a drowning bird. Her sunglasses were askew, having nearly slipped off, and her clothing stuck uncomfortably to her skin. She shivered violently below the setting sun, then peered up, her eyes lifeless.

She was met with an ashen face. Unseeing, unblinking gray eyes, initially appearing fearful, but upon closer inspection, devoid of anything at all. His posture was bent, legs unsteady as his chest rose and fell. Noelle stared. She searched for traces of pity, shock, anything she could recall in his expression, but found nothing. His eyes, she vaguely realized, were very similar to her own.

Her neck ached, and Noelle looked back down, her wet hair curling around the contour of her face. How it burned and hurt in her chest, a phantom

of the sensation. It laughed mockingly at her. Had she even been close? Had she really fooled herself into thinking it was a viable method?

She should have been upset. She should have been furious, shamed, fearful, as she would have been hours ago. However, even as she registered the events that had unfolded, she could not bring herself to care about them. She should have felt something, anything, at the very least. But the water had cleansed her of thought, and she struggled to recall the importance of any of it, her mind whirring faintly. Perhaps, a dying region of her mind supplied, it had worked, but not in the way she had expected. She raised her head, and shuffled into a half-seated position.

Renzo, in his unusually-wan complexion, wordlessly pointed some ways off. Noelle's gaze followed and found the barbershop, roughly thirty feet away. At its entrance, stood a woman of similar stature to Renzo, who approached them warily.

Nobody spoke at all, amidst the empty harbor and alley, as Noelle hobbled to her feet, supported by Renzo on her right and his mother on her left, and headed into the barbershop. Noelle, her sunglasses adjusted, looked over her shoulder at the setting sun. Renzo's mother shut the door and closed the shades with a flick of her wrist.

"They are looking for you," she said in a neutral tone.

Noelle replied with nothing at all, and accepted the towel that was handed to her. However, she did not dry herself, taking a seat on a foldable chair and leaving it resting on her lap. As silence reigned within the small room, everyone unwilling to speak for individual reasons, Noelle found herself drifting off slightly. She heard the phantom voices of familiar people echo in her ears, the voices of what they would say if they saw her at this moment.

"Heavens!—what has happened? Bring me my equipment, quickly. As for you, explain this instant!" She heard the voice of Miss Karpel.

"—unstable. This occurrence is nothing more than that of an anomaly. Her condition is temporary and her sessions will begin soon." She heard the voice of Professor Lithgow.

And, as for her grandma, she wouldn't have said anything at all. She would have been seated at the edge of her mattress, her wrinkled skin strained

at the lips, smiling gently. And Noelle would have stared back, the introductory pamphlet clutched in her hand down below.

Her dull thoughts were interrupted by the resting of a hand on her shoulder. Noelle looked to the side. Renzo's mother held a large tin bowl out for her to take. Cupping the sides of it with both palms, Noelle peered down into it. Her reflection was warped and twisted.

Renzo watched carefully from the corner of the room as his mother spoke. "There is water in your lungs." Noelle closed her eyes. Her stomach felt bloated, nauseous, and the sting of the water still had not left her airways. Despite all this, she could not bring herself to cough. She could not bring herself to gag. As the two people watched her, stared at her, she felt she could no longer bear it.

"We will not speak of this?" Noelle rasped, abruptly standing up. Renzo's mother raised an eyebrow as the bowl and unused towel was returned to her. Renzo had taken several steps forward, but made no attempt to stop Noelle as she strode toward the door. Without hearing a response, she opened the door and closed it behind her, immediately staggering forward.

Her arm wrapped around her stomach, her eyes rolled back, and she gasped slightly for air. "It is a discomfort and nothing more." After the wave of nausea had passed, Noelle stood up, then stumbled through the street and into the neighborhood, leaving behind a dripping trail of water.

Although the sky was pitch-black, the air was still a little humid. Her wet, cold clothes mixed with the warm sweat that beaded at her neck. After what seemed an eternity, Noelle was nearly at the door of the navy house, but as she reached out for the handle, an imbalance in her stance nagged at her.

Noelle traced a hand along her right side, until it reached a bump just below her hip. She froze. Her surroundings were silenced. Reaching into the pocket of her raincoat, she fisted out the pulpy remains of a paper airplane, and stared at it through the dim, flickering streetlight.

And, for some reason, she felt a peace settle within her, a silk sheet laid over the ruins of her artwork. With a sudden, great understanding of everything that had unfolded within the past weeks, of every thought she had

thought and every urge she had felt, Noelle smiled to herself, albeit a little sadly. “I got too close, didn’t I?”

Chapter 6: Euthanization

Renzo idly traced a finger across the desk, watching as ripples followed alongside the grain of wood. “Hm. That isn’t quite right.” he tapped his finger once, twice, and saw stones in a pond, pebbles in a pool.

Carelessly, he recalled the previous night—his numerous attempts to fall asleep, yet each time he began nodding off he would hear strange voices and see strange things, and in retaliation, his mind would wake from its stupor and restart the process.

Even now, when awake, the effect had not worn off. It was every now and then, here and there, that he would inhale a gust of cool air and feel it burn in his lungs, a blue fire flooding his mind and sending it into a flurry of panic. He did not realize his breathing had stalled.

“Are you—okay?” Kolya asked, concern coloring his features. Renzo slowly turned towards him questioningly, momentarily unsure of how to respond. The white morning light was cast upon his face, illuminating his confusion, painting the worn streaks of his stress almost younger, innocent.

“Yes.” Renzo paused. “I think I should leave to work on my project. I’ll see you later.” In robotic motions, he stood up, nodded towards Miss Karpel, then exited the classroom and headed down the staircase towards the last classroom of the hallway. The door was ajar, but Renzo did not seem to notice and patiently waited outside.

“Hello?” There came a meek greeting, a face peering out from beside the door. Renzo looked up, registering the tall cloaked figure that watched him.

“Hello,” he muttered dully. “I’m here to—Miss Karpel sent me for my project.”

“Ah, of course!” exclaimed the boy. “I believe she mentioned it, and I’m sorry—as of late I’ve been very busy—come right in.” Renzo stepped past the threshold, wincing slightly as his eyes adjusted to the bright room, for there lay before him an expanse of windows stretching from wall to wall, floor to ceiling.

What also quickly came to his attention was that the room, relatively barren besides several burly cabinets, was silent like no other facility within the building, possessing the placid aura of a frosted lake. The windows, facing the front of the school, depicted to the left a desolate cluster of young Frauwood trees, and to the right the deserted market of Port Octavia, carriages long abandoned, flyers muddy from erratic rainfall. Renzo felt a little empty in his chest at the sight, and unconsciously took several steps back to observe it in its entirety.

From this view, this perspective, it looked a world apart, his eyes failing to recognize the foreign land before him. He had been so caught up the past few weeks he had not had time to truly observe what Port Octavia had become. It wasn't that he hadn't been aware—waking to a quiet harbor and watching his mother scrape together pennies—but, brashly put, he had not cared so much as he did now.

"Euthanization."

Renzo's head snapped to the side, seeing the boy's wistful expression. "Euthanization?" he questioned.

Nodding towards the window, the boy replied, "That is the name of this painting. That is what I call it." Renzo momentarily considered calling the boy out for his lunacy, but recalling his own unstable state of mind, settled to play along instead. After all, what was the use of a mad man calling out another mad man? He was no better, not in the slightest.

"The painting," Renzo articulated carefully, "it didn't always look like this."

"Not at all. At least not physically. But no matter how much art may change, our perception of it will not."

Renzo raised an eyebrow, skeptical. "Really?"

"From my own eyes," the boy explained, his sorrowful gaze fixed on the ruined city, "I still see what it used to be. Although it changes every day, every hour, I will never see purely what it is in its present, because I will always compare it to how I remember it." Renzo, unsure of how to reply, licked his lips in hesitation, then changed the subject.

"Why … do you call it 'Euthanization'?"

The boy let out a deep sigh before he began to explain, "I am not quite sure myself. There is no euthanization depicted here, and there has not been. But there is always a certain foreboding—call it a hunch, if you must—before a death, an execution."

"Of someone?" Renzo tensed.

"Of anything at all." His gaze slid over to his bookbag against the wall, in which resided the *Ea Verba Sapientis*. However, it was at this moment he seemed to recollect himself all at once and interrupted Renzo's to-come response, a little panicked. "Ah, oh dear, I'm terribly sorry—I have been distracted, I have digressed, let us see what you have come here for, let us see how I can help you."

Renzo narrowed his eyes, but saw the boy's pupils dilated with fright, and opted to spare him of the struggle. "My research topic, do you know of it?"

The boy, slightly relieved, replied, "No, I'm afraid I do not."

"I am studying hurricanes." Renzo was aware of how immature it sounded, especially at this time in Port Octavia, as well as how vague it was, given there was hardly any information surrounding the study. He was unsure as to why Miss Karpel had not denied his proposal—did she anticipate his failure with curious eyes, or—was she no different from everyone else in refusing to acknowledge the existence of an incoming calamity? Perhaps, his proposal had never been heard in the first place.

"May I ask why you chose it?" The boy hummed as he headed to the cabinets in the back of the room, Renzo following at a safe distance.

He shrugged, quietly responding, "Isn't it obvious? A taboo of a topic, and you may make your assumptions but I will be honest—there has always existed that foreboding, not unlike the one you mentioned earlier, an ominous and unspoken dread, and I have a masochistic tendency of chasing what terrifies me most." By the end of his sentence, Renzo found himself sneering.

Interestingly enough, the boy observed him for a moment, his features neutral, before turning back to the cabinets and carding through various files.

Eventually, he pulled out a large stack of cardstock, threaded together at the edges, and set it atop the cabinet with a small *thump*.

"What's that?" Renzo asked.

"Documentation," the boy answered, angling the faded text towards the light to read. "Years 5332 to 5333, one of the most catastrophic hurricanes of Port Octavia, lasting a little over a month. I'll let you read the rest later." He allowed Renzo a brief glimpse, each piece of paper charting weather fifteen days before and fifteen days into the hurricane. Dropping it into his arms, Renzo buckled slightly at the weight of it.

The boy returned to the cabinet and pulled out a fresh stack of cardstock, handing it to Renzo as well. "You have a pencil?"

Renzo nodded, "Yes."

The boy pointed to the worn stack in his arms. "That will be your mentor." He pointed to the fresh stack. "This will be your project."

With that said, the boy lifted his bookbag, collected his own journals of documentation, checked inside for his padded satchel of equipment—a modest set of hygrometers and thermometers and sample tubes—then left the room and left the building, Renzo at his heels.

The two of them started through the empty streets, Renzo grimly eyeing the building behind them, before adjusting his grip on the stacks he held and the pencil between his teeth. Within a hundred meters, he already found sweat beading at his neck, his clothing sticking to his skin like that of a leathered sodden peel. It was humid, and in addition to the violent winds, he found himself blinking away specks of debris and dust.

Both the boy and Renzo were silent throughout, long shadows cast down the boy's face, his cloak whipping behind. The wind howled fiercely, a harsh and desperate note, whistling a high ring in Renzo's ears until he could no longer bear it.

"The weather's been odd," said he, echoing the words of someone he dared not think of.

The boy looked up, then responded in a hollow voice, "Yes, it has."

They followed along the outskirts of the city, not far from the school, walking along a strip of gravelly infertile land, ugly in its appearance and ambience. It wasn't completely infertile, however, for around them grew great tall shrubs and weeds that Renzo normally would have regarded with disinterest, but rather stared at them with an unfound longing.

It was soon that they reached a small hill and began to trek up, trudging along a thin path in which the grass had been flattened by excessive treading over the past years. There were no trees, and it soon became easy for Renzo to spot a looming structure that had been built at the top of the hill. Constructed from rotten planks of wood, though made up in the fact the craftsmanship not shoddy in the slightest, there stood what appeared to be a windmill roughly three times the height of Renzo. At the moment, it spun with fervor so great he feared the structure would not take it.

"An anemometer," the boy explained. "It is not perfect in the slightest, it is not standard and issued from a government, but what matters is consistency. Your results only matter when you are able to compare them to each other."

From there, they set off, and the boy taught Renzo how to count the number of revolutions to record them, and from his satchel retrieved his other tools, some of which were small enough to fit in his palm. They measured the air's humidity and temperature, they collected soil in little tubes, and wrote what they saw around them.

Renzo squinted at one of the lines the boy had added. "That doesn't seem very important."

"Perhaps it isn't," replied the boy. "But the memory of the human brain is more fickle than you may think, and when there comes a day in which something looks off, you will forget what exactly it was." The first sheet of cardstock was filled within an hour, a relatively simple chart, and Renzo peered down at it in an odd interest, clutching it. He looked back up at the boy.

"You're Patrick?"

The boy stiffened. "Yes. What of it?"

Renzo spoke indifferently without accusation, “You’re religious, from what I’ve heard. I didn’t expect you would attend a school of science.” Patrick, as a matter of fact, did not seem upset by this claim, and even smiled a little when answering.

“The *Ea Verba Sapientis*—the religion I follow—it has never stated that I cannot believe in science, or any other belief. It is a very … loose-reined system, if you must call it that. The Frau Thamar may make a claim, and it is you who chooses whether to believe in it or not.”

Renzo blinked. “I didn’t know that.”

“Most people do not.” Patrick’s smile turned bitter.

They stayed at the hill a little longer, beneath the blazing sun and blazing winds. Renzo turned and saw a sloped field of wild grass bowing in waves, dabbed a brilliant green and glistening at the tips. From his peripheral vision he spotted the edges of Patrick’s dancing cloak, and from the other side, the blurred blades of the anemometer. And it was very, very odd, that in these scarce and paltry moments, for no particular reason, Renzo had never felt so free.

Supposing it was Patrick’s influence on him, from that moment on, he seemed to find beauty in nearly everything. He saw it as they passed the stark streets of Port Octavia, he saw it when he stepped around a dead dog, its form flattened from days of drying. The concept of euthanization itself seemed less confined, and for better or worse, Renzo adopted a carelessness when thinking of the approaching hurricane.

Patrick, Renzo realized, was not of gloom and sorrow, as he often appeared from outside, but rather a serenity, an acceptance of sorts. Renzo himself was not very different after that. It was not that he had *forgotten* his turmoil, the way his hair bristled at the sound of the wind or touch of water, but he had separated himself from mortal terror, and watched his life unfold from behind a wall of glass, like a scientist.

Renzo held the cardstock in his two hands, feeling a pride swell up within his chest. He collected his first week of data.

***

Renzo, upon arriving at his mother's barbershop, witnessed a very peculiar scene. From the window lattice, he saw his mother leaned over a foldable table, fussing over Kolya—Kolya of all people!—or more specifically, his hair. Pinned down like a child, Kolya was gesticulating and seemed to be protesting, only to be hushed by his mother.

Renzo timidly opened the door, clearing his throat quietly. His mother peered up, and a look of exasperation rose to her face. "Foolish boy, where have you been?" Grabbing Kolya by the scruff of his neck, she thrust him forward, then said, "This young man was kind enough to inform me that you had been missing from school the entire day! Explain, please."

"I was," Renzo started, then paused, pictures of grassy hills and wooden windmills sprouting into his mind, "working on my project—the one I mentioned." That morning, he had not found Patrick in the classroom, and had therefore set off on his own to collect data. He must have lost track of time, for he remembered peering up and seeing the sun fallen far past noon. However, with more pressing issues at hand, his eyes drifted to Kolya and glared at him slightly.

"How do you know where my mother works?"

Kolya laughed nervously. "I think I saw you go here after—"

"Answer my question properly!" Renzo's mother interrupted, with both Renzo and Kolya turning to look at her, Kolya having to angle his neck at an odd angle. "That 'project' you mentioned weeks ago? Clarity has never been your strength, my dear b—"

"Sorry—"

"*And*," his mother added menacingly, pointing towards Kolya, "you failed to mention you made a new friend—scratch that, *first* friend." She turned to face Kolya, her tone instantly softening and a genuine smile arising to her face, "I must thank you again for associating with my son. He is far from the friendliest to work with." Renzo, still standing at the entrance, buried his face in his hands.

Following several continued minutes of bickering with his mother, occasionally interrupted by Kolya's insistences that he was a nuisance and to leave, to Renzo's great misfortune, he was nonetheless convinced to stay, or rather forced by his mother. "Really, really! You are a nuisance of no kind," his mother reiterated. "If you feel so useless, you might as well run a few errands for me with my son."

His afternoon consequentially was spent at a mortar and pestle, grinding away at herbs and various pigments for his mother's lotions, Kolya beside him. It went unspoken between himself and his mother that she had no need for more lotions, for there was no one to buy them. He knew his mother was desperate for Kolya to stay for any reason at all. It was a little embarrassing, but altogether caused a slight disturbance to toil within himself—that he had neglected his mother for so long she was finding any reason at all for *him* to stay.

Cayetana Esmillia was a single mother, as most mothers of Renzo's classmates were. Their fathers were all merchants, tradesmen, typically visiting their families a couple times a year, with it rather clear as to why that was not the case currently. Cayetana, despite her many misfortunes in her early upbringing, was a prideful woman simply because she made sure to act pridefully.

When the news of the hurricane arrived and the ports shut down, she hardly blinked and never failed to put dinner on the table at the end of the day. When their customers failed to show up by each passing day, she went from door to door to sell her products, routine unaffected. However, Renzo was vaguely aware that they were reaching the end of their savings, and it showed in his mother's fraying demeanor—subtle, but noticeable if one looked hard enough.

He was quite aware he wasn't helping by disappearing from school, by returning each day to the barbershop a little later, and alone. Lost in thought, his hand slipped and the pestle chipped his thumb, startling a slight wince out of himself.

Kolya paused his work to look at Renzo, then asked, “Uh—where were you today?”

Nursing his thumb, he contemplated several seconds before answering slowly. “The hill, do you know of it? It’s a little ways from the school, down the gravel road. There’s an anemometer there for my project.”

Kolya blinked. “I don’t think I’ve been there before. My project only requires me to collect samples from the trees right outside the school.”

“What are you measuring?” Renzo asked.

“Growth, mainly. Over the past few years, the soil’s become more depleted of nutrients, dirtier from the harbor’s oil, and while most plants have suffered from this, Frauwood trees have experienced a sudden growth spurt. Each sprout is reaching a height of six feet in mere weeks when they should be at four. It’s a mutation that might not be good for the tree in the long term.”

“Is that so? How did you find out?”

Kolya scratched the back of his neck, embarrassed. “A few months ago, I planted one for my sister when she comes to visit. I hardly put any thought into its location, how deep it was supposed to be buried. I didn’t really expect it to grow. I only recently noticed it was growing faster than it should have been.”

“She’s visiting?” Renzo hummed absentmindedly.

He laughed. “She wants to come over right now, but I told her about the bad weather, so probably as soon as hurricane season passes.”

“When she comes, you should bring her here to my mother’s barbershop. My mother will probably like her, she always wanted a daughter,” responded Renzo. Kolya smiled. They returned to their work, and remained until dusk when Kolya needed to return to his house.

“You’re welcome any time!” Cayetana Esmillia called out hoarsely, holding the door wide as Kolya exited and waved. Renzo gave a little wave, standing near his mother at the threshold. The sky was red from the setting sun, casting the streets in a warm light and spotty shadows. The two of them watched in silence as Kolya’s figure gradually disappeared around the corner, his footsteps no longer audible.

His mother's arm slowly lowered back to her side, her head tilted down a little, half her face in shadows. She almost looked worn, streaks of stress outlining her eyes. Renzo swallowed a little. "Mama?"

Cayetana Esmillia's head snapped up, a smile gracing her lips once more as she looked over her shoulder. "Yes, my boy?"

"I—are you," Renzo stammered, finding himself at a loss of words.

"Yes?" His mother tilted her head in curiosity.

Renzo looked his mother in the eye, as much as it pained him. They stared each other down for a moment, his fists clenched, toes curled. He wanted to ask badly, ever so badly, but asking would mean losing what he had just gained. "Nevermind," he muttered. His mother did not look disappointed, but did not say anything either as she turned back towards the setting sun.

Renzo returned to the barbershop and began to sweep, cleaning the floor, closing the shop. As he reached to close the shutters, he saw his mother still standing outside, her back facing the window. She was startlingly still. Renzo ignored the dull throbbing, the unrest within himself as he could only stare. He was a coward, nothing but a wretched, contemptuous coward. He was too scared. And his mother was too proud.

***

Back and forth. Renzo watched, his hands and arms neatly folded behind his back, front facing the contraption, as the pendulum swung from side to side. However, as of late, the contraption seemed a little broken—the pendulum favoring one side over the other, leaning more of its weight on it.

"Renzo," Professor Lithgow, standing beside him, spoke sharper than he usually did, "Do you know why I asked you to stay after school?"

"I've arrived late and even missed multiple of your classes recently, sir." Renzo held his gaze straight, refusing to even glance at the professor.

"That's not quite it, though I understand your reasoning," Professor Lithgow replied evenly. "Rather, there is something I wish to show you.

Follow me, won't you?" Without showing reaction of any sort, Renzo nodded, then followed the hobbling professor out the classroom.

They headed across the hall and down the stairs, turning into a perpendicular expanse of space, doors lining both walls. At the very end of the room was a set of double doors, painted gray and windowless. They appeared not unlike the doors guarding the boiler room, clearly bolted shut.

From the interior of his coat, Professor Lithgow pulled out a large brass key, and with the turn of a *click*, the doors groaned open. Renzo followed behind warily.

He was immediately met by a musty smell, slightly different from the one in the library, a scent less refined and even a little sour. The lighting in the room was dim, barely enough to read the labels plastered to the shelves. And on the shelves, neatly arrayed by the hundreds, were glass jars containing insect and plant specimens, not unlike the ones of Miss Karpel's classroom. The professor closed the doors behind them.

Professor Lithgow headed to the very end of the storage room, in which the jars grew larger in size, around the size of Renzo's own head. As he followed that train of thought, his eyes widened in realization.

"Yes," the professor confirmed, waving a hand towards the jar Renzo was eyeing, "the cerebellum of a sperm whale." Joining the professor's side, neither of them spoke for several minutes, watching the jars. Suddenly, Professor Lithgow laughed abruptly. "I can assure you none of these are human brains, if that was what you were wondering."

"Why don't you have any?" Renzo questioned carefully.

"I like the way you think! I knew I chose the right student for this—your classmates are too squeamish, too moral. As for your question, there are, in fact, no legal qualms restricting the school from obtaining a human brain, but we are completely and utterly lacking in volunteers." Professor Lithgow sighed, a troubled expression on his face. "I've been looking to appeal to the older folks of the city, but with the hurricane about, no one answers the door."

Renzo stared at the professor.

Seeing this, Professor Lithgow burst into laughter once more. “Ah! You must be thinking—you must be thinking, why don’t *I* volunteer, but worry not! I am not offended in the slightest. It is not even an unreasonable question, given my white hair and wrinkled skin, but I assure you I still have several years left around the corner!” Renzo remained silent. However, shortly following these words, the professor’s expression turned serious, and he oriented himself back towards the shelf of jars.

“I have been thinking, as of late, of a purely theoretical concept.” The professor narrowed his eyes as he considered his next words. “One, in which a human is alive, their blood is flowing, their brain is about and functioning, but they are without consciousness, without thought. Do not confuse this with a coma, there is no head injury preceding it, but rather, the person’s own *will* to become inanimate, to cease their thinking. All at once.” Professor Lithgow spoke very quietly, “Tell me, Renzo, what is a human without any form of thought?”

“A dead one.” Renzo replied impulsively. He watched the expressions on the professor’s face waver, and stood his ground unsurely, regretting his instinctual response. He could not figure whether he had said something foolish, he could not figure whether he had said something wrong.

“I see. You are excused,” the professor spoke at last, sounding almost a little strained. Turning heel, Renzo hastily made for the door, eager to leave the professor’s presence. However, not within six feet of the exit, he did not anticipate that the professor would speak once more. “And wait, excuse me, I have forgotten something very important. Take this, won’t you?”

Renzo turned, and spotted a pamphlet held out by the professor. Walking slowly, he accepted it and scanned its cover. *Psychotherapy Sessions*, it read in bold, black letters. His clutch froze.

And, in a painfully-familiar fashion, the subsequent breath he drew in from the musty, sour air burned in his lungs like fire. Water flooded his ears and he heard a foghorn sound from beneath seven feet of murky water. A swirled blue sky flashed through his eyes. Breath hitching, he hardly heard

Professor Lithgow's next words. "Mondays and Wednesdays in my classroom after school for an—"

"I don't need it," Renzo said quickly.

Professor Lithgow raised an eyebrow. "This is not intended for you. I meant for this to reach Noelle Favre. Of course, I am completely willing to offer you—"

"Thank you," Renzo sputtered, voice thin. Folding creases into the pamphlet from his grip, he faintly walked towards the exit, wrenching the door open and exiting the specimen storage room. Gasping for breath, he practically ran across the hallway and exited the building, discarding his dignity completely. Rounding the school, he slowed upon reaching the window of Patrick's classroom. Staring inside the classroom from the window, he squinted to see if any one was inside, but his own reflection obscured his view.

Beside this lay the reflection of the barren expanse of land and dirtied carriages. It was fainter than the original scenery, but nonetheless framed and vibrant in its own right. "Euthanization," Renzo muttered, the humid air coating his shallow breathing. He stood there a while longer, stupidly, hands limp at his sides, pamphlet dangling from his fingers.

Renzo felt a sudden and violent urge to bring his fist upon the glass and shatter it entirely. He saw it clear and vivid in his head, the falling shards—he saw his fists clad in dry blood. But he did not, even as tears pricked at his eyes. "Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed at all." His voice quivered. "I have fooled myself into thinking I have, but nothing has changed in the slightest," he sobbed bitterly, thinking of Patrick's words.

His mother—his mother! She was probably at the barbershop at this very moment, wondering why he was late again. And Kolya, he was likely also there, reassuring his mother that Renzo had not stayed by his own choice, with his skeptical mother believing it to be another petty excuse. And Renzo himself—he was too careless, too lazy to approach them and talk to them, to speak simple conversation, to even smile a little.

Renzo paced about, stuttered in his step as he muttered incoherently, his face wet with tears. "Nothing has changed." His mind felt terribly

disoriented, flickering and frantic, torn between revelation after revelation. He murmured like a mad man. “For what is to come—but what of the one before? What of the one before?” And, as he continued to pace, he concluded he could not face his mother nor Kolya, and allowed his feet to guide him to the navy mansion with stained-glass windows.

***

Upon the rapping on her door, Noelle opened it to a rather familiar sight. Renzo, pale with a furor, stood very still, having shown no reaction to the open door. His eyes were red and crazed, yet altogether worn and without reflection. His hair was exceptionally disheveled, the strands uneven and slipping out of the ponytail. He clutched a pamphlet to his chest.

Noelle, staring blankly, questioned dully, “Why are you here?”

Renzo slowly raised his head. “I—I wanted to talk. About what happened at the harbor, just a week ago.” Following these words, he watched for any trace of her reaction.

“And what of it?” Noelle asked with a surprising indifference.

“You haven’t come to school since,” Renzo began, scrounging for any excuse or lie, “Miss Karpel wants to know how you’re doing on your project.” Unexpectedly, Noelle tensed, and even behind her shades, Renzo could imagine her eyes narrowing.

After several passing moments, she said at last, “Come in.” Renzo followed her resignedly, slipping off his shoes and shutting the door once he had entered. It was terribly dim aside from the colored rays of light streaming through the door’s stained glass window. Appearing in spotty blurs of red, yellow, and green, they seemed to dance and flutter across the pasty wall.

Treading through the hallway a safe distance behind Noelle, Renzo respectfully turned his gaze away from rooms they passed, though he was sure they were all empty and without furniture. Upon reaching the drawing room, Noelle halted and knelt down to retrieve a musty journal—one Renzo recognized—lying against the floor and wall.

The floor was scattered with used pens and chipped graphite, and Renzo meagerly suspected that this was where Noelle had been spending most of her time. Speaking of the journal, Noelle flipped it to a certain page, almost randomly, if not for the fact she paused to stare at it before handing it to Renzo. The two of them took a seat on the floor cross-legged, facing each other, and Renzo squinted to see what was written on the page. Or rather, drawn.

"I've been dreaming, as of late," Noelle mused, the tip of her finger at her chin, "of the most peculiar things." *An angel's face, milky skin and eyes half-lidded, drawn in the harshest lines*. "You see, she speaks beautifully and tells me the most interesting things. She enraptures me," Noelle continued, a dreamy gaze settling on her face. Renzo flipped the page. "We play children's games, we talk, we explore the place she lives in, and by the end, we always lie down to take a nap beneath the blue sky."

Renzo stared at the drawings, at the doodles of flowers and pies, tracing them with his gaze. "However," Noelle started, her lip twisting a little, "I know she is troubled. Each time I dream, she asks me, 'Do you want to come to my house? My parents aren't around.' And each time I reply, 'I don't want to go there.'"

"Why don't you want to go?" Renzo questioned oddly, looking up from the drawings.

For a moment, Noelle's lip quivered and it appeared she would reply honestly, before she changed her mind and prompted to alleviate the question. "Why do you wonder?" she asked, a small and playful smile on her lips. "Why do you wonder when you are clearly talking to someone with a distorted mind?" Shortly after, her smile turned bitter, resembling Patrick's to an uncanny degree.

Renzo suddenly shut the journal, his face set and frozen. He remained that way for a long while, Noelle watching curiously, before he blinked at last, turning to her. Straining his voice, he began, "It is not very good of me to ask, but what did it feel like to drown?"

At first, Noelle did not answer, and Renzo feared she was glaring. Her jaw twitched. “It was horrible. Unpleasant.” She did not bother to elaborate. Renzo himself looked a little lost at this answer. “You do not seem pleased with my response,” Noelle noted. Renzo flinched.

He sat there troubled, unsure of whether he had fulfilled his purpose of coming here at all. Rationally, he had. He had asked the question and received an answer, albeit a brief one—a valuable piece of insight, as Patrick would have said. Yet, he could not prevent the frown that tugged at his lips.

“Do not feel bad,” Noelle muttered mindlessly. And, before Renzo could anticipate, she reached up and lowered her sunglasses a smidgen, just enough to reveal her bloodshot eyes. They glittered like Neptune. They glittered like Pluto. “It seems that we are both in a similar situation.”

Renzo quickly realized he had *not*, in fact, fully fulfilled his purpose in coming here. From his left hand, he lowered the creased and folded pamphlet between them onto the floor. *It seems that we are both in a similar situation*. “Yes, it does,” he replied.

“Behind the glass?”

“Behind the glass,” Renzo confirmed. Of the two, one of them lowered their head in thought, and the other lowered their head in shame.

Chapter 7: A Sentimental Friend

"Do you want to come to my house? My parents aren't around." She was perched weightlessly on the low rotting fence, azure eyes twinkling and white hair snaking about her shoulders. Resting her face in her palm, she smiled down towards Noelle, awaiting a response.

"I don't want to go there," Noelle answered listlessly, hugging her knees to her chest. The sun was very bright, directly overhead, and Noelle held a hand to her forehead to watch the girl's dangling legs. Behind them lay a field of startlingly-still grass. There was never any wind here.

"Again? That's too bad." The girl sighed, troubled, twirling a strand of hair between her fingers. "But, I would never force you to do anything. We're friends, aren't we?" she continued, a kindly smile arising to her face. Noelle looked ahead sullenly.

Following a moment of suffocating silence, in which there were no bird calls or rustling leaves to fill the air, the girl leapt over the fence and gently took Noelle by the hand. "Come on, let's go play." When Noelle did not initially respond, there flickered in the girl's eyes something resembling hurt. She dragged Noelle to her feet mechanically, then began trekking the two of them along the field, Noelle not resisting.

"That's the old windmill," the girl laughed, pointing off into the distance. When Noelle did not turn to look, the girl reached over and nudged her chin to the direction. Noelle looked at the windmill. The girl pointed towards a dark bramble to the right. "And that's the blackberry bush." She nudged Noelle's chin, and Noelle looked at the blackberry bush. They continued their walk, tresses of grass grazing at their ankles.

"That's the rusty wheelbarrow."

"That's the purple plow."

"That's the farmhouse mansion."

Noelle returned her gaze back to the horizon. There was no end to the field, no matter how far they went. One could sail the ocean knowing they

would find land eventually. But here, one would not even dream of it. They would know they would find nothing but fields of grass. That was what a utopia really was.

It was soon that they reached the barren road, spindly cracks stretched all across the dry soil. Noelle halted in her step, then kneeled down to observe them from an angled perspective. And, as she had theorized, the spindly cracks followed all throughout the endless road, a trail of strewn webs.

"The bus isn't coming, you know," the girl leaned down to murmur above Noelle's ear. "Come on, silly. Let's go do something better." She reached over to lace her fingers with Noelle's, then pulled her away from the road and into the field. They went from brisk walking to running, but the girl eventually forfeited in her attempts, as Noelle had slowed to the saunter of a dying horse.

As the two of them reached a gradual stop in the field, the girl pivoted about to face Noelle, a hopeful gaze in her eyes. But Noelle did not meet them. The glare of the sun in her vision, beads of sweat slipped from the pores of her scalp, and she was completely, utterly unable to focus on anything else. She was not aware the girl was looking at her until afterwards. However, their gaze hardly lasted a moment before Noelle reached up to caress her watering eyes.

As she did so, she knelt down onto the field, then lay back to face the sky. The girl had little choice but to follow in tandem. When Noelle removed her hands, her eyes squinted achingly at the bright sky. The girl's eyes were open and still. As Noelle began to doze off, her head lulling to the side, there flitted in the girl's eyes something along the lines of a desperate resentment. And when she closed them, she began to scheme.

***

Within the declining city of Port Octavia, the hurricane was regarded contradictively by children and adults alike. When word of it had first spread months ago, enforcement was hardly required in order for protocols to be obeyed. Despite the guaranteed financial losses, the looming terror of a

hurricane was satisfactory for a majority of business owners to close their shops. In the middle of May, throughout the course of a week, the waters of the harbor were emptied, and the shores grew stacked with crates and containers deemed unnecessary additional weight by departing sailors.

However, when the foretold hurricane failed to appear, under the correct circumstances, something very particular happened to the people of Port Octavia. As days dragged into weeks dragged into months, a buzz of restlessness resided, but along with that, a lingering paranoia. A business owner would peer out his shutters and think to himself, “I see no hurricane. I see no reason not to run my shop.” However, shortly after that thought, he would see all his neighboring shops and vendors empty, and then think, “If the hurricane comes tomorrow, they will remember me as a fool. If the hurricane comes tomorrow, my losses will be double of what they are now.” And that was how Port Octavia came to be an unemployed, dying city.

Nobody could conjure a definite answer as to when the hurricane would come. Renzo himself, as he sifted through his charts of cardstock, was puzzled by his documentation. The wind would act erratically, cuffing at roof tiles and blowing up great plumes of dust, then the next day, completely docile and yielding.

The temperatures and humidity levels he measured hardly resembled the typical progression towards a hurricane. The hurricane of 5332 to 5333 had been recorded fifteen days before and fifteen days into the disaster. Renzo had recorded sixteen days. And today would mark the seventeenth. However, as he reached for his satchel of equipment, Miss Karpel stopped him.

“It isn’t safe to stay outside for long, today. Wind levels are too high. I would advise against going out at all.” She was not wrong in her statement. Earlier that morning, as students had headed to school, a majority walking along the streets, there had already occurred an accident with flying debris. The injury was not serious, but weather hazard markers had already been distributed all throughout the exits of the school.

Grimacing, Renzo dipped his head and returned to his seat. To his right found Noelle hunched over her desk, tiredly writing in her journal, her

figure cloaked in shadow. As of late, Miss Karpel had begun to clear out the cardboard boxes, therefore causing a rearrangement of desks, with Noelle's no longer lined up against a window.

Speaking of which, she looked a little ill, a pallor dabbing her cheeks, yet still she wrote fervently in her journal, her palm blocking his view of the page. Renzo could not muster a guess as to what her project was, and had not felt interested in knowing until now.

With little else to do, he turned back to the rest of the classroom and observed what his classmates were doing. Beside him, Kolya was charting out the data he had collected, occasionally asking Renzo a question regarding notation and formatting.

A few desks away, he spotted Harper nailing together the truss framework of a model bridge. At the window ledge in which Noelle had previously sat next to, there sat several basil plants which Sofronio tended to, dabbing at the leaves with a stained gauze. Others, not unlike Kolya and Noelle, were at their desks writing or charting, and Renzo was left to sit and watch.

He felt oddly fascinated. Never had he registered the normality—the overt fact that the Phoenician was a *school* and he was in a classroom. He had spent the past weeks at the hill, isolated and his hair flying freely with the wind, and when he was not at the hill he was pacing along the streets, also alone. Along with all that had unfolded, including the hallucinations of his imagination, never had he registered how ordinary his life, literally speaking, really was.

"I'd like to make a brief announcement, as class is approaching its end," Miss Karpel interrupted, the class turning towards her. "As you may have noticed, I have made work of clearing out the boxes, which, in case you were curious, were several *severely* delayed shipments I ordered years ago. Among these shipments contain a chemical parcel I have been planning to introduce to you all. Your homework is to review your safety pamphlet, and bring safety glasses to our next class. You all are excused." A shadow passed by the door

window, and the little tin bell in the corner of the classroom chimed gently, pulled askew by the cord.

Students began to pack their bags and file out of the classroom. Renzo, however, remained sitting for a short while, his head perked up in interest, staring intently at the boxes behind Miss Karpel's desk. There seemed an invisible force that drew him to what was inside the box, but he could not reason why he would be curious about something so specific he knew nothing about. Or, perhaps, not knowing what it was may have been part of the reason he was drawn to it.

He hastily stuffed his book bag and made way for the door, following Kolya, but paused for a moment to peer over his shoulder. He and Kolya were of the last students leaving, but Noelle was still found at her desk scribbling in her journal, having disregarded the bell entirely. Miss Karpel did not seem to mind this and even seemed a little fond of her presence.

Renzo and Kolya headed across the hallway and down the staircase, but due to the weather hazard, found the indoor lunch seating so crowded they opted to head back up and eat in the hallway on the floor. Renzo felt unusually hungry, most days having no appetite for food at all.

"Will you be at your mother's shop after school?" Kolya questioned.

Renzo hesitated slightly, answering carefully, "Yes, but I will be held back about an hour. I have something important with Professor Lithgow every Monday and Wednesday, but it is nothing to worry about. Are you going to my mother's?"

"Yes, she invited me to come over," said Kolya sheepishly.

"Then, you should go first. There's no need to wait."

"It's fine," Kolya reassured, "I can wait in the hall, I can do my homework and then we can go together." He tore his bread in two and began eating.

"Shouldn't you go first to tell my mother I'll be late?" Renzo asked, frowning.

"You're always late," Kolya said casually, unaware of Renzo's flinch. "And, yes, it'd be rude of me not to be on time, but it'd also be rude of me not

to wait for you. I'm not sure why," he continued, smiling a little, "but I think it would be better if we went together."

Narrowing his eyes in thought, Renzo responded after a moment of contemplation. "Alright." As they ate, exchanging occasional glances, Renzo heard a huddle of students, not very far away from them, speaking loudly in claims and conversation.

"My mother—she works all the way in the Pearl Plaza—she wrote to me a little while back, saying the hurricane would arrive around now."

"Really? I don't believe it." Several students responded sarcastically, while others let out exclamations of shock.

"Well, believe it or not, it doesn't matter very much, because she's coming to pick me up by carriage in a week or so, taking me inland where it'll be safe. I'll spend the rest of the year at a relative's place—I've never even met them, but they have this giant mansion and courtyard and my mother told me to greet them as 'Sir and Lady Garrison.'"

"Well, have fun on your leave! Maybe you'll come back at the end of the year to a city in ruins. I'll be sure to leave a few farewell love letters stashed in my trunk, you'll know where to find them!" A gaggle of girls chortled loudly, slapping their friend on the back. As their conversation drifted away to miscellaneous topics, Renzo turned towards Kolya, a serious expression on his face.

"What do you think of the hurricane?" Renzo inquired quietly. He was pleased that Kolya did not break into stutters as he had partially-feared, and rather remained without speaking for a moment, his hand resting on his chin in thought.

"I think," Kolya started a little unsurely, "I think it'll come eventually."

"What makes you think that? The predicted arrival of the hurricane has been modified three times already," Renzo countered, though he left no clue in his tone as to what he himself thought of the hurricane.

"That's true, but hurricanes are hard to predict. You work with the meteorology department, don't you?"

"I do, with one member, mainly. And you're not wrong." Renzo paused. "The Phoenician likes to brag of its meteorology division, but, in truth, we know little about what really warrants a hurricane, and how far in advance signs of it appear. Patrick—the member I work with—told me recently that it's less of the hurricane we need to worry about and more so the weather in general." Upon saying this, Renzo suddenly looked very miserable. Kolya did not notice this and continued his explanation.

"If the weather has been erratic, then it must be because of the approaching hurricane. I know I may be making false correlations and conclusions from an explanation so simple, but I still believe it. I don't have enough information, but if I don't make a claim in the first place, then there is no one to disprove me."

Renzo looked up, then questioned curiously, "You make a claim for no reason at all, knowing it may not be rational?" Kolya laughed at this.

"I was never very knowledgeable from the beginning. If I knew enough, I wouldn't have to guess, and I could make rational claims. But here, I am left to guess and disregard the name of science, at least temporarily."

Renzo smiled lightheartedly. "Well, you are not the only one who is not being rational." At this, they both laughed.

Following lunch, they headed over to Professor Lithgow's classroom, in which they spent the class working silently, taking notes from a textbook. Something Renzo gradually came to notice, was that despite the dull and dim work the professor assigned, nobody ever quite fell asleep or dozed off. It was the clock, each fall of the pendulum resonating throughout the silent classroom, that felt so inexplicably uncomfortable Renzo found himself caught in an odd state—as though ready to doze off, but strung by the fear of a nightmare.

He distantly recalled the first day in the library, the sickly sensation of wasting away, reading the words on a page without paying attention to their meaning. The diagrams became corrosive lines which became black print on white paper, burning and doubling in his vision. From the look of it, his peers weren't fairing off much better.

Tilting his head, he saw Kolya's pencil shaking, his mouth dribbling and his eyes wide with ardent concentration. Behind him, he saw Noelle doodling idly in her journal, looking even more ill than in the morning, despite the kinder light of the classroom. It was warm, not stuffy, but it was the level of warmth misplaced in such a state of room.

The tin bell from the corner of the classroom rang gently, and it took Renzo a moment to register its sound. As the class gradually filtered past the door, mute and reluctantly waving goodbye to their professor, Renzo sat and watched subconsciously, his head whirring faintly.

"The west exit, in an hour?"

Renzo turned his head slowly towards Kolya's voice, then lightly nodded in confirmation before Kolya slung his bag over his shoulder and exited the classroom. As the door behind Kolya shut, leaving the classroom devoid of but three people, Professor Lithgow stood up.

"I thank you all for joining me today," he said, his glittering eyes fixed on Renzo. "We've only got an hour to spend, so I shall begin now." Without looking, Renzo could sense Noelle's presence, her signature mien of inscrutability as she stared at the professor, leading his mind temporarily astray until the professor did something very unexpected.

From his back pocket, he pulled out a little button the size of his fingernail, spotty and moth-eaten, holding it forward for Renzo and Noelle to see. "This button," he started, "is of no value amongst the general population, yet I wish to spend today discussing such random and ordinary objects, and why they aren't to be overlooked, especially in the presence of a selected individual.

"Sentimentality explores one of the most curious psychological passages of the human mind, the concept of *attachment*. We are naturally sentimental creatures, each and every one of us, and even the most deranged mind can be bound back to its humanity by something as simple as a—button. You seem puzzled, Renzo. Is there anything you wish to be explained once more?"

"Not at all, professor," replied Renzo quietly, although it was apparent he did not quite understand what was being said at hand. Noelle, however, had her gaze fixated forward, focusing on Professor Lithgow's every word.

Stroking his starched goatee, the professor continued, "I see. Anyway, as I was saying, due to sentimentality, a mere object can lead us to opposite sides of the planet, all in the thrilling sensation of internal revelation and recognition, occurring for no exact reason at all.

"I must tell you the story of one of my former students I have mentioned before, currently a sixth year in the meteorology department, taking place when he was your age and assigned the very same research project in Practical Science. It was during this time he became an obsessive sentimentalist, leading him to great redemption, or as others may say, his permanent ruin.

"If you may have recalled, his research topic was 'skies,' their changing appearances and nothing more—sounds and sounded quite useless. By all means I do not know how it was approved by Miss Karpel, but still he managed to surprise us all in the most unexpected way. You must understand, it was around this time he picked up the *Ea Verba Sapientis*, foreshadowing his future as a devout follower of the Frau Thamar. And yes, he was thoroughly teased for it, but he clung to each passage of the book obsessively, muttering them by memory when he had nothing to do.

"It was during December that year he was found in my class being ruthlessly bullied around by his peers—they detested his purple book, they were just that sort of hateful atheist that brings a bad name to all the rest of us scientists. You see, they were pestering him for a stack of paper he guarded between his arms, refusing to show what was on them. Nobody in the class really knew, but we had all seen him carry this stack of paper around for the past few months.

"At last, at the verge of tears, he reached to wipe his eyes, and his peers used this opportunity to strike." Professor Lithgow did not mention any administrative action on his part. "In a blur and grab, the papers went flying in a brilliant shower. As they fell, he foolishly sprawled himself across the floor

to collect them. His attempts were futile, as we all saw what was on those papers. Each sheet, a little bigger than a playing card, depicted intricate paintings of the sky in the most radiant colors, the exact date and time scrawled in the corner.

"Caught in our shock, no one went forth to steal his paintings, but rather watched in silence as he slowly and painfully recollected the entire stack. Afterwards, hands shaking, he was haunted as to why the class was silent and motionless—he assumes the worst, you know. And through his wicked imagination, he came to believe the entire class detested him as they detested the book.

"As I headed home after school, late at night along the harbor, I saw him standing at the edge, wavering and uncertain. I did not say anything, and I do not think he noticed me. The following days, we—his peers and myself—believed he was ready to end it all. But he never did. Even without reasoning or speculating, I knew it was because of that purple book he clutched to his chest each class, unwilling to let it out of his sight. That purple book and each of its two hundred passages. Since then, he was never pestered or bullied again, and his peers settled to ignore him instead, which he was not unhappy with."

At this pause, Renzo and Noelle did not say anything. They expected the story to continue. But it did not, and Professor Lithgow looked down, a bittersweet smile on his face. Wordlessly, he returned the button to his back pocket, and carrying a stack of books he had prepared beforehand, he passed them out between Renzo and Noelle.

Books of poetry, they were. Anthologies of ode poems, specifically. And the remaining twenty minutes of class were spent reading these, the professor sitting still at his desk, gazing forlornly. Renzo flipped to the middle of the book.

ODE TO WHAT DOEST NOT EXISTETH.

Seeth here, seeth now,
the fruits and golds thine eyes beareth,
their luscious, golden fi'ry fears,

and doth not fret, thou knoweth how—
how and when to closeth thy lids—
closeth thine eyes to seeth, my dear.

***

As Kolya had predicted, Cayetana Esmillia was more than delighted to see Renzo return, not alone, despite being an hour late. He walked along Renzo's left side, and in the midst of arguing with him about petty things—their favorite bird feathers, in this case—they did not notice Renzo's mother already waiting at the entrance, beaming brightly. Renzo was the first to look up and greet her, abashed and slightly crimson. "Hello, Mama."

"You know you're late, right?" she replied, though not sounding very upset at all. "Will she be joining us as well?" Confused, Renzo peered over his shoulder to where his mother pointed, and found Noelle trailing behind them, looking a little lost. She was close enough to have heard their words, but did not look their way until a moment later.

"Noelle?" Renzo questioned, feeling odd. It was the first time he had addressed her by her name. She herself looked a little surprised at this, and most unexpectedly, shyly waved towards them. Renzo was aware it only appeared that way because they could not see her eyes, but regardless he felt no ill intention from her.

To be fair, he had never felt ill intention from her before. It had always been "neutral," or more likely there had been none at all, with his cynical imagination having filled in the gaps. Before, he had not liked Noelle very much because it felt as though she knew something he didn't. He could no longer say the same.

"Would you—would you like to join?" he asked awkwardly, Kolya waving back beside him. Without answering, Noelle nodded humbly, and followed the three of them into the barbershop. As usual, Renzo's mother assigned them a series of errands, starting with sorting out expired bottles and solutions in the back room.

Given that Noelle had not volunteered in the first place, she was offered the option of taking a seat to rest, but nonetheless she wished to help out, causing Renzo's mother to take a liking to her almost as quickly as she had with Kolya. While Cayetana Esmillia had, by no means, forgotten the night Noelle had been found at the harbor, she took care not to mention it.

As they worked, Renzo looked past his shoulder through the crack of the door to glance at his mother, who was treating a rare customer. She looked cheerful—she looked nothing like that day before the setting sun, worn and depressed. He felt foolish for having wanted to ask her that question, but all the same he was sure of what he had seen.

His mother laughed and conversed with the customer, and from his peripheral vision he spotted Kolya smiling. Even Noelle, as she was kneeled on the ground, working on the lowermost shelf, did not affect the lighthearted atmosphere. Renzo could not bring himself to ruin it.

Distantly, however, he could not help ponder when it would all come to fruition. Recalling the conversation he had heard from the hallway, several students were already packing their bags and moving further into the mainland. A multitude of neighboring businesses had permanently shut down, leading a dozen or so families into a struggling poverty. Renzo did not have the heart to ask his mother how she was doing, and likewise, when, exactly, they would run out of funds.

It went unspoken, that within this point, the only people residing within the city were those that did not have the means to move—financially, or obstinacy in general. To those that *had* left, it did not matter to them whether the hurricane would come at all. Because, Port Octavia was a dying city.

Renzo wrung his hands. Port Octavia was, in every aspect, a dying city. And—and, if *anything* were to happen, anything destructive to a devastating degree, then surely, it would be no different than putting it out of its misery. Putting it out of its misery was infinitely better than suffering—tied between revelation after revelation, the worst kind of self-inflicted psychological torture. Yet, despite treading on this thought very carefully, as always, it was halted to a stop, a part of his mind refusing to go any further.

Because, as he glanced over his shoulder upon hearing his mother's mirthful laughs, he knew this was not suffering. It was these scarce and paltry moments that managed to balance the scale, to prove there was not enough suffering yet. It was only when these moments would fade away, that putting one out of its misery became a mercy. Where that line was to be drawn, however, was a problem he had failed to solve for a long, long time.

Chapter 8: The Scientist

Within the library dwelt a thick air, warm and a little damp from the recent rainfall. There was hardly anyone to be found inside. Half the candles had been snuffed out, their flowery incense drifting throughout in dense clumps. Renzo lay against a shelf limply, blearily rubbing his eyes. He could not tell whether he was in the geology section. He could not tell whether Kolya was beside him. As an exhaustion overtook him, he fluttered his eyes shut, hearing soft but firm footsteps approach around the corner.

Noelle took each step minutely, bearing an intense and feverish concentration. She sweated profusely, but whether it was from the warm air or something else entirely, she could not say. She should have felt uncomfortable. However, something *promising* prickled at the back of her neck—Noelle felt that something great was to occur.

And, from how the most enlightening hallucinations took place, in the time it took her to blink, a black veil draped itself across her face, and she felt her sleeves unravel to reveal cuffs of gold. Curling her toes, she walked around the corner, faceless, and took a seat atop the rough and studded carpet. “Wouldn’t you like to hear a story?” she asked out loud, slurring her words a little.

Her veil dimmed her vision to the point she could not make out her audience. Regardless, it did not matter much. It did not matter who she talked to—it mattered that she talked at all. The Frau Thamar was responsible for finishing what she started.

“How should I start?—well, I thought of it just now, for no particular reason. I think I heard it a long, long time ago. I forgot who told it to me, but I did not forget any part of the story. The whole of it took place in a barren and remote area with no trees and no people. Save for this scientist, who spent his days running experiment after experiment, immersed in his studies. Day and night, he stood behind a wall of glass, observing but making no move to physically interact with it. Only observing.” Shortly after saying this, her voice

sobered a little, and she looked down, depressed. “Of all the things he studied, none of it was alive. Nothing alive—no organisms, no animals or insects, not even a sticky leaf.

“One night, he began entertaining the idea of studying something animate. It was a foreign but sweet thought. And, over the course of several weeks, this ‘sweet thought’ morphed into something more … an obsession, you could say. He thought of it so often he envisioned it in his own lifeless experiments. He saw faces in smoke and ashes, fingers in wisps of air, and he even claimed he saw a little bird fly out of the flames of a red fire.

“Despite all this, he was still a scientist. He refused to accept any supernatural concept, and *if* it happened to be something supernatural, it could still be explained by science. In other words, he believed that even supernaturality could not escape the reach of science. Anyway, no matter how stimulating his visions grew, he still did not step outside his wall of glass. It was not that he wasn’t curious, but he sensed it would be best for him to remain behind the glass.

“Of course, the self-control of any scientist would never be enough to prevent the disastrous from happening. He was to be found running a new but relatively ordinary experiment, scattering salt-like crystals on a tray and setting them on fire. And flammable they certainly were. From these crystals, great, blue flames rose and roared, the lenses of his glasses reflecting with equal brilliance. He remained unfazed, allowing the fire to burn and blaze, for this was nothing out of the ordinary.

“That was, until he saw these flames, with an intricacy unparalleled by any of his former experiments, take the shape of a man.”

***

“A man that looked very much like him.” Noelle was to be found passed out, splayed ungainly across the flowerbed, her chin towards the sky. An elderly woman, reading from a big black book, approached carefully,

leaning over the body to peer at the little girl's face. Her eyes were open, and within each of her glossy pupils, a dot of the sun.

She was not dead. She was not asleep, either. She lay amongst a bramble of disarrayed poppies, foam dripping from her mouth. Bunched at her shoulders and waist was the dress of a noble daughter, the frills scuffed and blackened. She lay in the garden of the Favre Manor.

Placing the story aside, the elderly woman, without a word, lifted the limp girl from the flowerbed and headed towards the door of the mansion, her knees grazing a trail of bowed tulips. As the old woman walked, Noelle's eyes remained open, spotty rays of light from the trees overhead passing along the curve of her face.

Upon stepping past the threshold of the mansion, they did not linger long. The elderly woman threw a shawl over her jutting shoulders, another over Noelle, and wrapping the girl gently, carried her out to the entrance of the manor. There, a carriage waited, and the coachman showed no surprise when spotting Noelle's passed out form.

"The usual?" he addressed the elderly woman. She nodded in reply. Settling into the carriage, Noelle was laid across the seat, her feet hanging off the edge. The elderly woman reached out and gently tucked her bangs aside, before pulling the shawl just over her eyes. With that, the coachman brought a whip upon the horse, and they set off away from the Favre Manor, a great plume of dust following.

Passing the green rolling hills, the wildflowers that freckled the fields, the old woman watched with an expression of not quite trepidation, but rather a tired resignation. Such a place, in which the Favre Manor resided, could only be found in a very particular region of the mainland, bearing minimal wind and the most ideal landscape. The old woman was reminded of Abiram Favre.

"When I was a child," he used to say, "I would dream of rolling green hills and dreamy skies, only to wake to a dirty urban settlement! And, I very much wish that for my daughter, she will dream of rolling green hills and wake to rolling green hills—or perhaps, there will be no need for her to dream at all!" The old woman sighed, her mind flickering to Abiram Favre's wife.

She had always spoken dreamily: “Children are pure creatures, aren’t they? It’s a shame the world around them sees to corrupt their little minds and turn them to the devil. However, if a little girl grows up innocent, surrounded by innocence, then she can be saved. I don’t care if my little girl is stupid—I don’t care if she spends her days picking flowers, I only want her to live a pure life.”

Turning to glance at Noelle, the old woman stared somewhat sadly. Speeding down the road, the carriage lurched very slightly, and the shawl slipped below Noelle’s eyes. And, once again, two little dots of the sun appeared in her black pupils. “Ah, that won’t do,” murmured the old woman, carefully tucking the shawl over her eyes once more. Noelle twitched lightly, but made no move or protest.

Shortly after, the carriage slowed, ascending a graveled hill, and reached an arduous halt midway, the horses heaving, sounding strangled. “Sorry, granny,” the coachman smiled, well-meaning, his arm over the seat to peer back. “I’d hate to make you walk, but I’m afraid our horses are as old as you yourself.”

“That won’t be a problem,” the old woman replied. “Only, I would require your assistance to carry Noelle. Humphrey has reminded me to lower the stress of my legs. Otherwise, he says, I won’t be walking in a year or so.”

“Ha, Sure thing!” the coachman laughed, adjusting his hat by its brim. Having done so many times before, he swept Noelle into his arms without disrupting the shawl, and fixing the carriage in place with the push of a pedal, he began trekking up the hill, the old woman following behind.

The coachman was a young man with cropped brown hair, having been hired only several years previously. He bore such a coincidental resemblance to Noelle that he had often been mistaken for her brother, and, through his fondness for her, he had done the same himself quite occasionally. Noelle did not talk much to him, but she had never shown displeasure when he hung around the garden with her for hours at a time. What must also be noted, was that it was the coachman that had taught Noelle how to draw.

Of course, as a noble daughter, Noelle had been taught how to read and write, how to count the segments of a quill and taps on a wall. The idea of drawing, however, was absent in her life until she had spotted a bound stack of sketches in the coachman's bookbag. Pointing them out and asking to see them, it remained one of the very few times the little girl had shown anything besides indifference.

"Ah! I see you've spotted my most recent project," the coachman had replied cheerfully, patting Noelle on the head and retrieving the stack from his bag. He allowed her to flip through the entire stack, each and every drawing.

"Who's that?" Noelle had questioned, pointing at a sketch of a stylishly posed figure. The coachman flushed a deep crimson and refused to answer, Noelle cocking her head in confusion. "Anyway," the coachman said after recovering himself, "I should tell you something *very* secret, you mustn't tell a soul. I've a plan for once I save up enough money, I've a *very* great plan! My dear friend—he has always wanted to leave this region—he and I will travel throughout the entire mainland, and I will take my paintings and projects to this old merchant. Rumor has it that if he takes a liking in your artwork, he'll make you rich with a snap of his fingers! Me and my friend both."

"I see," Noelle answered. "But why would you leave here? My mother says this place here is the only place one should live." Upon hearing that, the coachman had grimaced, looking almost sorrowful, and did nothing but pat her on the head once more. They'd never spoken of it since.

In the meantime, he continued climbing the hill, Noelle in his arms, the old woman trailing behind with the tell-tale sounds of her cane on gravel. As the hill drew to an end, ahead lay a little cottage, surrounded by a thicket of trees. The coachman slowed, allowing the old woman to pass him and knock on the door with the tip of her cane.

As though expecting their arrival, the door opened immediately, revealing a short and stocky man. He squinted at the visitors through his ovalled spectacles. "Ah, Noelle, is it? As well as her brother and grandmother.

Come in, come in!" He spoke boisterously, though his words were somewhat lost amongst his long red beard.

The visitors were quick to settle into the cottage, the coachman laying Noelle on a cot before claiming his usual chair near the door, and the old woman hobbling to lean against the wall. The short and stocky man, known rather endearingly as "Humphrey," rolled over a heavy cart, laden with fresh jars and salves.

The old woman spotted this, and asked, exasperated, "What shall you plan to try today, Humphrey?"

"Everything! I shall try everything!" he bellowed, wearing a fierce grin, eyes ablaze. He was too short to reach the cart handle, so he simply pulled it by a fraying leash. "Do not doubt me, old friend. In the month you've been absent, sunbathing in your rocking chairs, I've been up and about the mountains, scouring cliffs and trees for every herb I come across!"

"That can't be good for your health," the coachman called out, frowning. "You're not much younger than granny."

"Just you *watch* as I continue to do it once I'm 'granny's' age," Humphrey laughed, appearing even more energized than before. Striding over to Noelle with a glass of water in hand, he nudged her into a sitting position, gently waking her. "How has my favorite princess been? Any discomfort?"

Stirring, Noelle dazedly shook her head, then drank a decent amount of the water. Satisfied, Humphrey placed the glass aside, then proceeded to the "treatment," as he liked to call it—spooning salves for Noelle to smell, shining iridescent lights into her eyes. "Here, or there? Does it hurt? No? Then, raise your chin, let me see. Try this—no, that!"

The old woman and coachman were not alarmed in the slightest. They had placed their faith in Humphrey long ago, as the doctor had sworn Noelle would not swallow anything he had not already swallowed himself. And, despite his chaotic exterior, Humphrey was meticulous in his work, having scrapped entire projects for a single inaccurate measurement.

Without half an hour, Humphrey had assembled a collection of maladies and doses, placed into a little sack tied with a green ribbon. "And

there you go!" he announced gleefully, handing the sack to the old woman. "My latest work in a picnic cloth, best that you take care not to lose it, eh?"

"Of course, we cannot thank you enough, Humphrey."

"Anything for my princess. I've labeled each and every vial—for headaches, stomach aches, blurry vision, or just daily doses in general. Ah, yes, and one more thing." Humphrey scrambled to his cart, rummaging amongst stacks of notes of papers. At last, he pulled out a little leather journal, handing it to Noelle herself. "It's a shame your granny only drives you here once a month. The month you're away, if anything out of the ordinary happens, if you ever feel funny, a little more uncomfortable than usual, be sure to jot it down, won't you?"

Surprisingly, Noelle smiled a little before nodding. Accepting the journal, she clutched it in her small palms, looking terribly childlike. The old woman felt something twist within herself, watching this. "Thank you, Humphrey," she repeated, voice strained. "We ought to be going now."

Standing, the coachman headed over, and scooping Noelle into his arms, grinned at Humphrey. "Thanks!" he called out. Following the old woman, the three of them exited the cabin, closing the door behind. It was around late afternoon that they reached the carriage and began their way back to the manor. And, from the way Noelle remained smiling timidly, the journal resting in her lap, none of them could have anticipated the disaster that awaited.

Upon returning, Noelle felt well enough to stand and walk, stepping down from the carriage without assistance. She looked to the entrance of the manor, and saw a silhouette pacing in the window. A lean, feminine figure—she did not recognize who it could be, as it did not resemble anyone who frequented the manor on a daily basis. However, Noelle said nothing of it to the old woman and coachman, and simply headed forth and opened the door.

The woman inside skidded to a halt at that exact spot, her blond curls bouncing, her hands wrung behind her back. She stared at Noelle, almost

painfully, before letting out a shriek and rushing to her side. Startled, Noelle withdrew, stumbling back into the old woman behind her. “Who—”

“Alaya!” the old woman said sharply to the intruder, supporting Noelle by the shoulders. “What are you doing here?”

“What am I doing here?” Alaya repeated faintly, confounded. “What am I doing here? What am I—why! Has the world gone mad? Can a mother no longer pay her little girl a visit?” Her voice turned to a shriek, and once again she lunged forward to embrace Noelle. The old woman roughly drew Noelle back.

“Talk sense, dear. Please talk some sense into your words. Why are you here?” the old woman questioned, but the subtle tremor in her voice betrayed the connotation of her words.

Alaya herself was trembling. “*God*, what have you *done* to her?” She turned her attention to Noelle. “Why are you not reaching out, my little girl? Why do you look afraid?” Noelle blinked, her arms hugging herself, not quite in an act of self defense, but rather unfamiliarity. Alaya did not seem to recognize this initially, and repeated, “Why do you look afraid?”

At this point, the coachman ran around the corner, having heard the commotion. “What’s happening? Has the lady returned?” But his words saw no avail, for Alaya suddenly screamed, hands clawing at her face in revelation. Tears streamed down her face, and her words became barely coherent. “You do not recognize me? You do not recognize me!” Noelle only blinked.

It took several minutes to calm the lady, to guide her into the manor and sit down, Noelle and the old woman left waiting in an adjacent room. The both of them were silent, Noelle simply staring forward, not appearing upset or even surprised at Alaya Favre’s abrupt appearance. It was either that, or Noelle herself did not know what to make of what she felt.

Unable to bear it any longer, the old woman stood to her feet and strode forth into the corridor, opening the door in which Alaya resided. Entering and closing the door behind herself, she found Alaya laid down in an armchair, weeping quietly and murmuring incoherently. Sighing, the old woman went forth, leaning down, to gently grasp her dainty hand.

"Where is Abiram, Alaya?"

She paused her weeping. "He is far away." Although solemn, she spoke far calmer than before. "He is trading with merchants along the coast, around Port Octavia. It was I who offered to return and pay a visit to Noelle."

The old woman furrowed her brow, and replied, "I see. How have you b—"

"I'll say none of that, it is important no more," Alaya said miserably. "Tell me, how has she been? How has she fared without us?" The old woman curled her lip distastefully, refraining from making any bitter remarks that would surely send Alaya back into tears.

"She has been well. We have raised her the way you have wished." There was a beat of silence.

"I don't believe you." Alaya's face was screwed up, almost childishly, her finger pointed at the old woman in accusation. The old woman felt irritation flare up within herself.

Against her better judgment, she sneered, "Well, I can say for sure that she has eaten her meals and been tucked into bed with sleep in her eyes. I don't suppose that's more than you've been able to accomplish in the past several months." Alaya stood up, furious.

"Do you *imagine* I've been happy, carefree in the past year, away from my little girl? Do you not see that I have suffered during my time away? Of course I regret being away, but you have only made me regret it more, seeing that she no longer recognizes her mother and stares stupidly with stars in her eyes!"

The old woman scoffed, no longer rationalizing her words before speaking. "Was this not what you wanted? If I recall, you yourself said you didn't care whether she was stupid, whether she was simple, you only wanted her to be pure. If anything, you should have regretted what you asked for." Alaya went crimson, fists clenched to her sides, trembling with anger.

She responded scathingly, "I shouldn't have expected a nanny to understand. I shouldn't have expected *you* to understand." Her voice was

lowered to a dangerous murmur. “Of all things, can you not see she is struggling? She is pale, she is silent, she is clearly unwell.”

The old woman was taken aback, but Alaya continued. “She is no longer as pure. She smiles when there is nothing to smile at, she murmurs when there is nothing to murmur at. She spends her days following you, or perhaps that damnable coachman, unable to clear her own path. She is unsure of where to go, she is unsure of what to follow, and how she struggles—”

“A child cannot be ‘pure’ if she is capable of *thinking*,” the old woman scolded, eyes dark, and in the heat of the moment, completely unexpectedly, she struck the young woman across the face, sending her sprawling on the ground. “See your daughter, Alaya! See what you have done to her. Cease your foolish ideology, or it will bring you and your daughter to ruin.”

Alaya did not respond. She remained on the ground, slowly raising a hand to her cheek. The old woman watched in anticipation, eyes dilated, filled with fury and a hint of fear. And the two remained in this position, one woman on the ground in front of the other, the air thick with dread. The old woman’s hand still stung from the blow, and the numbing only made the sensation more unbearable. While she felt no regret, but she felt nothing else in place either, a hollow chasm in her chest.

“She does not remember me,” Alaya said at last, whispering softly.

“No, she does not.”

“She does not remember me.” It sounded almost like a confession. “She does not care for me,” she continued, closing her eyes, “she does not care for me!” Unable to utter another word, and overcome with exhaustion, she sank to the ground, eyes wide, defeated.

The old woman stood, watching, and it was only until she regained her manner that she carried the lady and rested her on the armchair to lay, bearing a similar exhaustion herself. She willed her hands not to shake. She willed her eyes to blink. And, chest heaving, she prayed Noelle would not notice her state of mind, nor what had just taken place.

Returning to the room where Noelle remained, her empty expression showed no indication she had heard anything from the adjacent room.

However, the old woman knew better—she knew this was not enough to be sure. Sitting down beside Noelle, she watched for any flinch, for any sign of apprehension, but there was none. The old woman could not figure whether she was relieved or only further troubled by this.

As for Noelle's failure to have recognized her mother, she did not dwell much on it. It was likely that at this point, she had already figured out who the woman was. Besides, her momentary stall, her inability to have recognized Alaya, was more complex beyond simply remembering or not remembering. The old woman gazed gently at Noelle.

"I am sure you are aware," she began in a hoarse whisper, "of your mother's latest situation, and her struggles, I shall call them. However, you may not be aware of the root of her struggles, and I believe an explanation has been long overdue." Noelle said nothing, but she looked up, indicating her attention.

"I suppose it would be best to start from before you were born. Abiram and Alaya were looking for a faraway place, away from the noise and disease of the urban city. They wanted to escape their landlady, they wanted to own their land. And, luckily, as Abiram's father passed, he inherited the fortune that allowed them to do so.

"Now, Alaya has always been a little … different, she has always had rather mystical ideas. When she was thinking of having a daughter, she wanted her daughter to be different, too." The old woman struggled to form an explanation. "She wanted her daughter to be pure, so to say—she believed that a girl who lived in the plains alone, wearing dresses and blouses and playing about, would be safe from growing cynical and corrupted. And, she still believes that, at this very moment."

The old woman continued. "Here is your option. We have not given you many before, and in such a situation, I feel it is only within your right to decide. Therefore, I strongly encourage you to choose. I have watched your mother cultivate her ideas in you, I have watched you struggle, unsure of whether to resist or not. So, I ask you now, do you wish to continue pursuing

… your mother's wishes, or would you rather disregard them entirely? Choosing will set your mind at rest."

It was really only then, upon listening to the old woman's steadfast and honest claims, that Noelle saw how distant her own mind may have lain, a dozen stringent plains away. Each of the words just spoken resonated clear in her head, but even then it seemed awfully far away, in the way a little letter could appear through a looking glass. Had she really experienced such internal struggle in which the old woman vividly described? For, all she could feel this very moment was a fanciful indifference—an indifference for struggles and their causes and consequences.

But, surely, the old woman had a point in the fact that her current state must have been caused by *something*. It didn't matter what this cause was, it mattered that there was one at all. And, what the old woman had just asked—choosing one or another—Noelle felt utterly indifferent to that as well. She continued to sit still, mind drifting off to a matter more pressing, and the old woman must have assumed her to be in the process of deciding.

I have watched you struggle, unsure of whether to resist or not. The concept of resisting or not resisting had never crossed Noelle's mind until this very moment. And how it bothered her, such a simple idea, the rule of what dictated as doing "nothing at all." She could not escape reason. She could not escape cause. And seeing to the tension in the air, her true dilemma was to decide whether or not to answer.

Just then, a light series of footsteps passed by the door. Noelle recognized them as the coachman's. Her hand twitched. And, as impulse pulled at the threads of her fingers, mocking how it would be to draw freely, a reply formed so naturally Noelle had but the time to think. "I'd like to disregard them entirely, if that's okay."

"Alright." The old woman dipped her head.

And, so there it was, the sudden catastrophe tied with a ribbon. Noelle, feeling no drastically different from before, stood to her feet and headed to the garden, but was intercepted along the way by the coachman. He knelt down,

frowning. “Are you feeling alright? That was quite a scene with your mother. She is doing better now, in case you were wondering.”

“I’m doing fine,” said Noelle. Surprised by the verbal response, the coachman raised an eyebrow, but all together saw no restraint or hesitation in her reply. She looked truly content.

The coachman grinned. “Are you sure? If so, you ought to join me at the drawing room—I’ll be doing some sketching again. There’s something else to look forward to as well, but of that later!” Noelle, easily accepting, followed the coachman to the front of the manor, finding his book bag already resting on a desk in the drawing room.

In terms of casual drawing, the coachman drew with a pencil, and a pencil only. As each of them took a seat on opposite sides of the desk, he offered her one as well as a small blade to whittle away at the dull tip. They did so over a small cloth, then wrapped it up and set it aside. A sheet of scrap paper was unfolded and placed between them both.

“Sorry, only paper I brought this time was from an old literary journal,” the coachman laughed. Noelle, as expected, did not mind in the slightest, staring down intently at the battered sheet in front of her. “What do you want to draw?” It was a question asked every time by the coachman, and one that never saw response. Neither the coachman or Noelle really minded, as it simply became rhetorical in their ears.

Noelle often started by drawing a line across the middle to divide the paper for the both of them, but this time, her pencil wavered, unsure, and she found herself drawing a stark diagonal line across the paper out of indecision. Frowning, she looked up to see the coachman’s reaction. He did not look upset—quite the opposite, really—and, as though an invisible midline still existed, he mirrored her line in return.

Staring in wonder, Noelle drew a bubbly circle. Once again, the coachman mirrored it, the circles slightly overlapping. The next few strokes she drew, she waited in between each for the coachman to mirror it. Their arms blocking the paper, their posture leaned in, it almost looked as though they were playing a game of chess, reaching out without hesitation.

This went on a dozen or so more times, until, at last, Noelle no longer reached out to draw the next stroke. She tilted her head sideways, and squinting amongst a scramble of lines and shapes, she saw a distorted face, one that almost resembled her own, a little. The coachman, also tilting his head, must have seen this too, questioningly tracing the silhouette with his finger. Eyeing each other, they both burst into an unanticipated bout of laughter. The coachman ruffled her hair fondly.

A while later, after the drawing room had been thoroughly cleaned, not a trace of graphite or scrap left, the coachman led Noelle to the front of the manor, in which they both took a seat. The entrance bore no furniture, so they simply sat on the floor against the wall, only several paces away from the door. A setting sun outside the window signified they had reached deep into the evening.

"What is there to see?" Noelle asked curiously.

The coachman smiled, patting Noelle on the head. "You see, my friend has decided to visit—the one I mentioned—and he wants to meet you."

"Really?" Noelle was unbelieving. Nobody had ever visited her before, this far into the country. No coachman from an urban settlement would ever agree to taking their wagon or carriage into such a place, in which their closest neighbor was perhaps Humphrey.

"Of course! You haven't got anything to do this evening, have you?"

"No, I haven't."

Beaming, he replied, "He should be arriving very soon." And so, they waited patiently, passing time through small conversation. Every now and then, Noelle sent a glance towards the door, expecting that, at one point, she would see a silent silhouette materialize at the mat, hand poised, ready to knock.

As she attempted to envision this very scene, Noelle found herself reminded of the stylish sketch she had seen quite a while back, the first time the coachman had shown his drawings. The coachman's friend supposedly fashioned a monocle in his left eye, his dark curls swept down and obscuring

the other. He dressed neatly—a waistcoat and tailored pants, but the colors remained a mystery for the coachman only drew with a pencil.

The sun set a little more, and the two of them sat, waiting. In spite of his attempts to hide it, the coachman seemed anxious, flinching at the slightest sound. “He’s never been to the manor before,” the coachman muttered. “Perhaps he lost his way?”

It was not until another quarter of an hour passed that he stood to his feet. “I’m sorry,” he said to Noelle. “I’ll be gone just a moment to see whether he’s near.” With that, the coachman left the manor and headed along the road, out of sight. Noelle remained sitting gloomily.

It was around this time that, on the other side of the manor, the old woman entered the garden, feeling oddly restless. She really shouldn’t have. Following her conversation with Noelle, she expected her own mind to be set to rest, having at last closed the strenuous matter after a decade. But she could not stop the adrenaline rushing through her blood, hot and sweaty as though she were a little girl again. She shivered below the shade and rustle of the trees. She found herself peering over her shoulder repeatedly, to a ridiculous point. She heard Alaya’s voice. *You flinch when there is nothing to flinch at. You look when there is nothing to look at*.

Shaking her head, the old woman headed to the flowerbed in which she had found Noelle laying that morning. Right next to it, on a large stone, was the black book she had left in turn of carrying Noelle. Reaching for it, the buckram coarse and solid in her hands, she headed back to the manor, entering the room where she had had her conversation with Noelle earlier.

The old woman was unaware that on the other side of the wall, Noelle sat on the floor, hugging her knees, waiting for the coachman’s return. Setting the book on her lap, she flipped to where she had left off, and began to read. “A man that looked very much like him. Such were the hallucinations that befell this scientist, but it must be noted that he was not ill. He was excited, but his mind was not deranged—he simply hallucinated the most ordinary type of hallucination.

"You see, hallucinations of these such were not only exclusive to those with deranged minds. Even a perfectly rational person, a *scientist*, could spot things they were not supposed to see, granted they possessed the passion. A difference *did* exist, but where that lay was unknown. And that very question—'thinking normally, what made it different?'—was the question that had been asked by every deranged person to live.

"And so, this scientist, upon spotting a man amidst the fire, stood there enamored, his mind put aside to the background. This man he saw did nothing at all but stand. Perhaps he waved a little, perhaps he opened his mouth and spoke a line of beautiful prose, but alas, it was still the scientist himself that decided to take a step forward. And, with another step, he was past the glass.

"The first thing he noticed was the heat. The blue fire ate away at the air, it swallowed and blew back gusts of intolerable heat, but even then, the scientist could not bring himself to care. He took a step forward towards the man. But it seemed, that with each step he took closer to the fire, the less he could see the man. With his last step, he could go no further, for he stood in the fire itself.

"The fire climbed along his legs, his body, it ate away his clothes and then his flesh. It was painful, of course, but the scientist had expected that. And, this went on quite a while, until all that remained was the fire. The scientist was but ashes that fed the fire. He had, quite literally, become the fire."

Noelle, on the other side of the wall, currently listening to the story, sat shivering, her body spasming violently. What exactly could have warranted this response lay in a thousand answers or more, but that subject was not of main importance at the moment.

Noelle stared through the window directly at the sinking sun, staring so intensely it brought tears to her eyes. But, no matter how long she stared, no relief was to be found—she could not stun her mind into paralysis, she could not stop it from tearing the seams of its flesh apart. She could only spasm as she watched—or waited—for the fabricated tapestries of her thinking to unravel with the tug of a string. This rolling corpse, broiling in her stomach;

this frenzied thought, euphoric, happy! But nonetheless sickly and nauseous. She raised her hand to her forehead. She was burning—burning away in great flames, albeit hallucinated flames!

The old woman finished the last passage of the short story. “And this fire, this bonfire of finality, continued to burn with pleasure, for a fire always ate with pleasure, even if it were to never change.”

The end of the reading did not equate to the end of her epileptic fit. If anything, it worsened the coherence of her frantic thought. The sun sank a little more, only its tip visible above the hill. Her hand fell to her side, limp and motionless. Her head lolled to the side, away from the sun and towards the door.

Where was the coachman? Noelle had never had a good sense of time, but she was sure the coachman had been gone for quite a while now. She could not find any control in her legs, and even if she were able to, she would have no reason to stand. She was to wait for the coachman and his friend, anyway. No matter how terrible the fit became.

Luckily, however, her spasming gradually faded, lowering unsteadily, occasionally returning but without the intensity of before. And, when her shaking ended completely, Noelle felt very weak all throughout. Her eyelids stung, and her mouth dribbled a little when she attempted to talk. That was no problem, she reminded herself, turning back towards the door. She was to wait for the coachman and his friend.

Outside, it had fallen dark, shapes in the window indistinguishable, and a chorus of night bugs sounding from below the ditch. A stray lock of hair fell to the side of Noelle’s vision. “Perhaps I ought to cut my hair,” she thought spontaneously. “And my nails, too. They’ve grown too long and scrape my sides when I sleep.” All sorts and kinds of random thoughts drifted to her head, idle thoughts that sprouted from a lightheaded and tired mind, even if it were moments after a particularly violent fit.

“Where’s the coachman?” Noelle murmured, wiping her mouth with her sleeve. It must have been midnight, or at the very least, approaching it. Still sitting on the ground against the wall, her legs splayed out, Noelle heard

timid footsteps approach and halt several feet away from her. A woman screamed.

Alerting the entire manor, several maids and cooks rushed over to see what was the matter, lights flickering on, as well as the old woman herself, who had dozed off on the sofa, book in lap. Upon seeing Noelle laying there blearily, all but Alaya sagged in relief. It was only she who lunged forward, embracing Noelle in her arms, sobbing loudly.

"Why is no one helping?" She looked round and round at quiet and awkward servants of the manor. "Why is no one alarmed?" It was the old woman that eventually stepped forward, swallowing.

"It is not infrequent to find her like this," she said sheepishly, reaching forward to help. Alaya slapped her hands away.

"'Not infrequent'? Why—you!" Furious, she clutched Noelle to her chest, ordering maids about with the mien of a raging tempest. "Water, yes, water, quickly! Towels too! Help me carry her, help me now!" Noelle was carried away from the entrance and laid across a sofa, wet towels immediately applied to her face.

Noelle closed her eyes, muttering, "Where's the coachman?"

"The coachman?" Alaya inquired sharply. "What about him? It is now dark, he must have headed home." There was no further questioning regarding the topic. The old woman brought forth the bag they had received only hours ago from Humphrey, tipping vials and other medicines down Noelle's throat, carefully explaining each of its contents beforehand to Alaya.

"I'll take her to Humphrey again, tomorrow, as soon as the coachman arrives for work."

"Humphrey? I'll come along, as well."

"There really is no need, Alaya. Humphrey is the most trustworthy man I know," said the old woman, massaging her temples.

"But I must. I must be there for her." There spanned a silence, in which neither party looked up or spoke. Despite her earlier outbursts, Alaya showed no anger towards the old woman. She was too fretful over Noelle, and rather desperate too, upon her realization of how much Noelle could not

remember her, and how much she herself could not remember how Noelle used to be. “It is okay,” Alaya mumbled quietly, “if she no longer cares for me. It is okay if she no longer remembers me. But, for letting such a thing happen, I must be there for her the rest of my life. I swear on my right hand.”

“Alaya, take a seat, please.”

“I swear on my name—I swear if I do not do this, I will climb the tallest tree I find and hang myself, I will walk a thousand steps to hell, I will—”

“Alaya, please!” The old woman was trembling, grasping Alaya by the wrist. “Take a seat. Please.” Alaya momentarily seemed stunned by the old woman in front of her, blinking as though she were unfamiliar. However, she did not resist the attempts to seat her on a stool near Noelle. She watched her sleeping face the entire night, leaned over, not a trace of fatigue in her eyes. If one did not know better, they would have said she even looked curious, staring at Noelle with soft eyes.

During this time, the old woman napped on a chair, falling in and out of troubled sleep. Once again, she observed the sweat that coated her palms, the disordered and unfamiliar state of her mind. When the first light of dawn began to trickle through the window, the old woman gave up resting all together in turn of pacing at the entrance, awaiting the coachman’s arrival.

However, even as the sun began to rise, even as the cooks of the manor woke and began bustling about the kitchen, there was no coachman in sight. “Strange. He always seemed a punctual man,” the old woman muttered.

Surely enough, the coachman made no appearance even as a light breakfast was served. Noelle, having woken recovered although dazed, also seemed to notice this, staring in the direction of the entrance, listening for the sound of his approaching footsteps. Several times, she pricked up in alert, mistaking a servant’s voice for the coachman’s lighthearted greetings. But, alas, as noon rolled around, it became clear the coachman would not be there.

The old woman sat, wringing her hands, distressing over this very fact until Alaya spoke up. “I have a coachman of my own,” she said, narrowing her

eyes. “He brought me to this manor from the city. The carriage only seats two, but I suppose we could fit three.”

“Really? Would you allow us to lend your coachman, Alaya?”

“I’ll have to pay him a good deal, that wretched cad. The deal was to provide me two rides only—one to and one back. But he can be swayed by money.”

“I will pay half the fare, then,” replied the old woman. With that settled, both women stood to their feet, determined. Assisting Noelle to the front of the manor in which the carriage waited, they carried her up the steps and seated her on the old woman’s lap. Alaya, after tucking the shawl over Noelle’s eyes, turned to the coachman, who was splayed out across the front, feet resting on backs of the two feeble horses.

“Oh, get on with it already, you miserable scoundrel,” Alaya snapped. “I know you aren’t really asleep.” The coachman pretended to stir, rubbing his eyes.

He mumbled, “Already heading back?”

“Not quite. This’ll be an extra, but I have money.” Shortly following those words, the coachman sat up, haggardly clothing hanging off his frame, grinning a haughty grin at Alaya.

“You got that, sweetheart. Where to?” Alaya looked murderous, but whatever she planned to say was interrupted.

“A man named Humphrey.” The old woman spoke sternly. “I’ll direct the way.” Sighing, the coachman straightened his hat, collected the reins, then lashed out a whip across the horses and sent the carriage flying away from the manor, winding rapidly down the unpaved road.

Although an uncomfortable and hasty ride, they reached Humphrey’s before the sun began to set, his little cabin appearing just over the hill. This time around, as the old woman knocked on the door with her cane, there was no initial response. Only then, did it occur to the old woman that Humphrey may have left for another of his exhibitions.

However, this fear did not last for the door eventually did open, Humphrey standing at the threshold in confusion. “Back so soon? Surely nothing happened?”

“I’m afraid Noelle had a particularly violent episode last night. She appears alright now, but we wanted to make sure.”

“Ah, alright, of course.” Humphrey hurried over to guide Noelle to her usual spot, but lacking the usual enthusiasm. He was clearly worn out and had likely overexerted himself the previous day. “And who is this?” he asked, peering at Alaya, who had been standing behind both the old woman and Noelle.

“Alaya.” Alaya said, and kept it at that. It went unspoken that she did not want Humphrey to know she was Noelle’s mother, for a multitude of understandable reasons. Noelle was laid down and examined all over, measured for her temperature and pulse, but there seemed nothing out of the ordinary, nothing alarming. For the first in a while, Humphrey looked at a loss of what to do.

“I haven’t found anything new to try. I didn’t know you’d be back so soon.” He looked ashamed.

“Oh, that’s nothing to worry about,” the old woman was quick to respond. “You’ve already overworked yourself, Humphrey. We came here only to check Noelle would be alright for the moment.” Her last words were half a lie. The old woman looked over his shoulder and saw Alaya standing near the door, looking upset, frowning.

“Alaya,” she called out. “You should head out for a breath of fresh air. You don’t look well.” Alaya muttered something under her breath before opening the door and heading outside.

As soon as the door shut, the old woman turned to Humphrey, her expression serious and a little desperate. “Humphrey, I am in need of your advice. I hate to bother you at such a time, but I cannot choose what to do, and each moment I wait, another option flies out of reach. I am running out of time right now, as we speak.”

Humphrey dusted his glasses off, and spoke without looking at the old woman. “I see. You must choose before she comes back?” He pointed towards the window, in which Alaya could be seen pacing back and forth.

The old woman paid his question no heed. “It’s Noelle,” she said, looking towards where she was laid down on the cot. “I don’t know what to do with her. I don’t know what to do with her mother, either. Despite her good intentions, despite our efforts, she is only deteriorating. Her mother—she would kill herself if Noelle were to—”

“My dear friend,” Humphrey interrupted, looking quite grim. “Please calm yourself. Noelle is not near death. You have clearly not been resting. You and her mother—the both of you must calm yourselves and think rationally.” Several feet away, Noelle lay very still, showing no indication of having heard their conversation.

“I *know* that, I know what you are speaking of, I *am* thinking rationally—too rationally! Too rationally!” the old woman stressed once more, her voice straining. “It was this morning I thought of something so terrible, something so sinful I ought to be flogged to the bone! We cannot do this forever, of course.” She began to babble. “This entire idea was ridiculous—moving here and living amongst ‘rolling green hills and dreamy skies’—Ha!” the old woman exclaimed, raising a hand to her eyes. “This is where the evil thought began.”

Noelle turned her head towards the old woman, watching her unravel with intrinsic interest. Humphrey crossed his arms, weary, but waited for the old woman to continue.

“You see, you see, I was speaking to Alaya this very morning, and I felt nothing awry at all, for the both of us shared a purpose, shared a meaning to our actions. The both of us wanted, ever so desperately, to help Noelle, but despite this sole fact a fear began to grow within myself—one in which our *intentions* would do but anything, for one reason and one reason only.

“Noelle cannot live here. Noelle cannot spend another day in that damnable manor, amongst these sickening hills and blue skies. But Alaya—I am not sure whether she agrees, we had a fight, you see, but even then …” the

old woman trailed off, a lost look in her eyes, before regaining her wording. “She said she would hang herself if Noelle were not to be by her side. She said she would … what a terrible thought!”

“Please tell me,” said Humphrey carefully, articulating his every word, “what it is that you plan to do.”

The old woman took a seat, hands in her lap, solemn. “Was it not obvious?” Her voice turned dark and hysterical. “I plan to take Noelle away, without telling Alaya. Alaya will not let her leave—but then again, if she is not by Noelle’s side, she will—” She cut herself off, lowering her face into her palms. And so there the dilemma was presented.

“How do you know she will not let Noelle go?” asked Humphrey firmly.

“I do not know. But I cannot risk it. If I ask, and she says no, she will know immediately of my plans and make any move to protect Noelle. That is the type of person Alaya is.” Following those words, silence ensued. The old woman had expected some sort of reprimandance from Humphrey, some sort of declaration that she had gone mad. And how she listened, waited for those words with anticipation, waited for anything that would relieve her of her status of sanity. To her great fear, she heard nothing at all.

Letting out a fatigued sigh, Humphrey lumbered to his feet, reaching towards the cabinets and pulling out a pair of procedural sunglasses, tinted black and bulky. They were the pair Noelle usually wore during examinations. He handed it to the old woman. He looked very troubled himself. “I will not sleep well for several weeks. But, if you decide to go, please take this. If I had known, I would have prepared something more.”

Stunned, the old woman accepted the sunglasses, tucking it into the sleeve of her shawl. “Is this a farewell?” she murmured.

“It may be. It may not be,” replied Humphrey, shrugging his shoulders. “I will leave that choice to you the moment you step past my threshold.”

“You—you approve of my decision?” Alaya’s name went unspoken.

"Please do not make me answer that question. I do not want to say, I do not know what to think. I do not want to influence your decision. Remember that your decision may be terrible, but this dilemma is far worse than anything you choose to do. It is misfortunate."

Turning away from the old woman, Humphrey headed to Noelle's side, where she watched them both. He twisted his beard as he spoke, uneasy. "I'm sorry, Noelle. I'm sorry I could not do much. But more than that, I am sorry for holding you here for the past decade. Your granny will take you where she sees fit, and find a doctor that may do a better job. Or, who knows, perhaps a doctor is not what you need."

Noelle listened, closing her eyes. She could not afford to open them without anything to conceal them, for her own sake. She could not bear to imagine what Humphrey would think if he did not find sorrow in her eyes. That wasn't to say she did not feel sorrow. But she could have felt a thousand other things, and solely sorrow was not enough to enclasp what it was she felt.

After Humphrey's parting words, he and the old woman stood, waited. Surely, it must have been only appropriate for Noelle, despite her quiet demeanor, to say something in return. But once again, Noelle could not form words. If sorrow could not describe what she felt, words could not either.

Noelle slowly sat up, looking away from Humphrey. Slipping off the cot, she headed to the old woman's side, hands clasped behind her back. "Goodbye, Humphrey," said the old woman, opening the door. Noelle did not look back.

Outside, the sky had grown dark all over, stars freckling the sky, tree canopies looming over, blending into the pattern of the hills. The old woman had half an instinct to call out Alaya's name, before she spotted the very woman sitting on the grass a far distance away, hugging her knees. Alaya had not seen and heard them exit, from the way she dawdled about, playing with the grass.

Later on, the old woman could only recall Alaya looking particularly beautiful that night, the moonlight flooding her face, the little shadows like little petals tucked beneath her ears, her nose. And this lasting image would

remain immortalized in the old woman's mind, deceiving her into believing Alaya would always look the same, even in her days of old.

Noelle, standing motionless, could not see Alaya, and simply faced forward, waiting for the old woman to lead the way. And that she did. A pooling dread in her stomach, the old woman walked forth, unflinchingly, Noelle at her heels, until they entered the trees and Alaya went completely out of sight.

And there it came again!—a sweaty feeling in her palms, hot and broiling as though her metabolism had retrograded a dozen or so steps. The tremble in her hands faded, and if anything, her strides grew more determined as she led Noelle away. Leaving Alaya behind—leaving Alaya behind! She had done it, she had accomplished what the mighty never would have.

"Goodbye, Humphrey. Goodbye." Her voice was crazed and laced with delirium. Noelle, unable to distinguish the words, glanced up at the old woman curiously. As they walked forth into the narrowing woods, the graveled path opening into span, the symphony of night bugs and crickets alike rose in volume, and given the otherwise silent atmosphere, the symphony appeared louder than it really was.

They soon came across the carriage, the haggardly coachman passed out across his seat, sleeping peacefully. The old woman hesitated, reached out a gnarled fist to wake him. But it was shortly that she recoiled, coming to the firm decision she would not take Alaya's only passage back to the manor. Guiding Noelle by the shoulders they walked away.

"Oh, Alaya, I'm sorry," murmured the old woman in her grief, lumbering side to side erratically. "If you really do kill yourself …" She felt a sudden urge to punish herself in return.

Halting abruptly, kneeling down beside Noelle, she reached out. "Here, I shall carry you." Wary but unresisting, Noelle climbed atop the old woman's ribbed back, and with a great heave she was lifted into the air as the old woman continued her trek away from the carriage.

Walking away? Where was she to walk to? And if there was nowhere to walk to, Noelle would suffer the consequences beside her well-intentioned,

albeit ridiculous actions. Yet, in spite of it all, the old woman did not hesitate in her step, closing her eyes to the torturous arch of her spine, the thinning of her muscles and bruising of her soles.

"Where are we going?" A question so innocent from the parted lips of a child, a question so simple that the old woman was momentarily caught off guard.

"We are going away, Noelle." She did not bother to lie. "We are leaving this place. We shall perhaps go to a nearby settlement, or a city. A coastal city would be most optimal." It went unspoken that the nearest settlement was miles upon miles away. And the coast was beyond anything rational at all. The old woman knew enough that Noelle would say and care nothing of it.

She did not, however, anticipate the next question. "What about the coachman?"

"The coachman?" asked the old woman unfamiliarly, blinking blearily. Unable to process this train of thought very far, she assumed it an irrelevant matter. "What of the coachman?"

Noelle gave no answer and closed her eyes. It was as though the question had never been asked.

And so, the old woman continued to walk along the road, hunched over, trudging past the logs and shrubs that had overtaken the pathway in obtrusive patches. Alaya's carriage would not be capable of reaching so far past the regularly maintained road. All the while, Noelle no longer feigned her sleep and fell limp against the old woman's back.

It was a couple hours later, the sky still dark, that the old woman could absolutely go no further, kneeling down and resting Noelle against a tree, before clambering to the ground herself. Her bones felt ablaze in a very strange way, one that disconnected the sensation as an observation rather than pain. The old woman peered over her shoulder, recognizing the thin line of smoke rooted from Humphrey's cabin barely visible amongst a ray of moonlight. In truth, she had not walked very far at all.

"To the devil I go." Her head sagged forth, the straws of her hair slipping from the tie. "I am a beggar, a nanny, and nothing more. I am mad, and so is Humphrey for allowing me to be mad. He should have stopped me." A deep resentment rooted itself in her chest, directed not necessarily towards any particular person, but rather towards all her misfortunes in a very childish way.

"If I could be simple I certainly would …" And so the old woman nodded off, lulling away in the midst of bemoaning miserably. However, despite her extreme fatigue, she did not rest long.

It was here and there that she would wake, startled, and with newfound resolution, lift herself to her feet and carry Noelle several paces forward before setting her down again. And like a prisoner walking towards a heaven that may as well have been an illusion, a speck in the distance, the old woman continued this numerously, at one point or another losing her conscious thought to an incoherent mantra.

It must have been a traveling vagabond that eventually stepped forth to end this pitiful sight, heaving the paralyzed old woman and little girl into their carriage and setting off towards the nearest town for medical treatment. Neither the old woman nor Noelle were later able to recall very much, for one had been unconscious, and the other may as well have been.

And following their blurry days of recovery and interrogation, they boarded a wagon away from the small town with a merchant and his wife, who were off to run several errands in the coastal cities. It was on such a day, riding in the slow-moving carriage amongst a condensed train of wagons, that Noelle asked a very particular question.

She sat primly, hands in her lap, but her expression was distant and far off, and remained so even as she began to speak. "And so a fire always eats with pleasure, you said?" Her head was angled towards the spot of sun shining through the taut checkered cloth.

The old woman beside her startled, and required a moment to place Noelle's words to a fragment of her memory. "The black book—you read it?" she questioned blankly.

Noelle paid no heed to the old woman's inquiry. "Are there any others? I'd like to hear them."

The old woman thought back to the black book of short stories, likely still sitting on the sofa at the manor, untouched by servants and cooks alike. She had not thought of it for such a long time that she could hardly imagine it a tangible thing. "I did not know you knew about it. There are several stories within it."

"What stories?"

"One of the typical madman. Another of a cannibal. And one of a dollmaker, I believe."

"Do you still remember them?"

The old woman hesitated before answering. "Yes."

Noelle looked down towards her coat, and reaching forth dislocated a rectangular object from the folds of her clothing, a familiar leather journal. And it looked so ordinary, so innocent of her lap, that the old woman felt her throat close up at merely the sight of it. She could not bear to think of it—of any of it! Yes, it would remain tucked away behind her eyes, it would exist, but she would not think of it. Her throat swelled and swelled, beams lodged in the thick of her chest. With but a choice, she weakly parted her lips, and in the midst of exhaling, began the first story. Noelle listened with glittering eyes.

And while she talked, babbled incessantly, she did not notice the carriage enter the city, nor the flurried bustle beyond the frame of the wagon, heading in the direction opposite of their own. She hardly noticed the change in air, the mildewed summer air and shift of breeze. It was only until the merchant turned a corner that was hardly a corner, that an ominous dread inexplicably settled on the old woman's shoulders, putting a pause to the story she told. And, as they approached, the carriage slowed, revealing how silent the street really was.

"I'm quite sorry to you and your granddaughter." The merchant grinned guiltily. "Although, mind you, I do not have much to be sorry for. I did nothing aside from what you asked, yet from my courtesy I still apologize.

Here is a place they will let you live in for free." He sighed. "A rumor really does wonders. As they move away, they make room for people like you."

Warily drawing the shades apart, the old woman watched, as a navy-blue mansion with stained-glass windows grew closer and closer. Noelle, following in heed, raised her head to stare. And as she did so, shifting the sunglasses below her nose, she felt, in that moment, overcome by an inexplicable sense of deja vu.

***

Let us proceed.
Let us banish what makes one sad,
and all that causes unfounded grief.
Let us be grateful for the friends we have been given,
and the great things we shall see.

As she woke gradually, peacefully, a pleasant buzz beneath her skin, she settled only to close them once more. Head against the foot of the shelf, Noelle murmured softly, repeated the conversations she had heard long ago with faces she could no longer remember. She felt warm, mildly feverish, and it was such the sensation she had longed for time and time again.

Across from her, Renzo sat awake, sitting patiently. Within the room wasn't a trace of light, and from this they were both oddly comforted, knowing around them could have been an expansive floor stretching several leagues or a little closet and neither of them would have known better—there could have been a dozen veils between their sight and the sighted and it still wouldn't have changed a thing.

"Do you see now?" Noelle murmured, addressing Renzo. "Sentimentality is a foolish thing, a very foolish thing, yet it is the only thing I live for."

"And if it were to go?" Renzo inquired curiously.

"It never shall. That was what the professor said wrong. Sentimentality was never to be gained or lost in the first place. For, as long as I

proceed to sleep each night, to meddle over trivial matters during the day, to eat my meals in silence, it shall not go."

"Does that make you different from the scientist?"

"I don't know." Gently prodding her eyes open with the tips of her fingers, Noelle felt at the lids, at the sallowed skin and jutted bone. Even now, as she opened her eyes to the dark, she could not tell how freely she saw, despite simultaneously weighing the sunglasses with her other hand, which she had taken off a while ago.

"You said you disagreed with Professor Lithgow." It was not a question.

Noelle replied idly, "Not really. I feel he missed half the point." Her eyes remained open. "For, how does one go about defining 'humanity'? How do you determine which 'humanity' exists, and which doesn't? A sentiment, as he called it, can draw back even the most deranged mind to humanity. And he assumes a sentiment to know what humanity is. The professor is a man of society, as my Grandma would have said. He cannot think beyond what he calls the greater good."

"And what about you?"

Noelle smiled. "I walk a thin line. Can you not see how tired I am?" She rested her hand on the leather journal, laying on her lap. "It would be easier, in the moment, to pick and fall to a side. But it is more tiring to return afterwards."

"Why don't you stay?" pressed Renzo.

"Why don't I, why—" Noelle started, but did not finish. She strained her memory for an answer, but anything that had occurred early in the year, months before she had arrived at Port Octavia, seemed far off and disoriented. "I cannot remember."

Renzo lay back against the shelf, exhaling consciously. "Who told you this story?"

"I don't know." The person who had once spoken the story had not had a face.

"When did you hear it?"

"A long time ago." The voice who had once spoken the story had not spoken in a long time.

As for Noelle, shortly after speaking those words, she did not expect to feel a sudden sadness swell in her chest. Not remembering any of it—she had never cared for things she could not remember. But now, she felt a great grief, a great regret she could recall none of it.

"I would change it all if I could. Write a story if I could." She spoke in the moment and in the moment only. "One, in which I traveled the lands and sailed the seas. I would see the industrialized, the unindustrialized, and settle in a place of neither. Someone in my family would be a merchant. And the other a coachman, perhaps. All of us—we would travel around, we would become artists, we would be rich. I would write a story like that if I could."

Yet here she could only sit with her dead and pale face, ten feet below the surface, her vision of nothing at all. There were no lands and seas to see. And she could not leave when bound to what she had already seen, to what she had chosen to see and had inflicted upon herself.

Renzo looked vaguely in her direction, and through the dark, imagined what her face looked like, whether she smiled or frowned, whether it was possible to find traces of sadness in her face. And what exactly he saw, he saw it through shrouds, a most standard face of every man. It was a face of death. A death not by drowning, but of climbing aboard the shores, in a last attempt to see the sky before never seeing it again.

Chapter 9: An Obituary

"Has it happened?" A caressing voice, one of a truest friend.

Noelle did not respond, staring down miserably. The girl reached out. "Seeing you sad makes me sad, you know." Wrapping her arms around the other, they embraced bitterly, standing heel to toe amongst a sea of still grass. Past her shoulder, Noelle watched the lazy drift of her hair, visible only in little wisps. It was light if she could touch it.

As they broke apart, still close in proximity, the girl gazed intimately upon Noelle, a closed fist to her side. Rather slowly she raised it to the space between them, and with the mien of an innocent child sharing a pebble, a sprout, uncurled it to reveal something small and something unexpected—a simple red bead.

"What is this?" Noelle inquired softly. She was not quite asking of the bead—she was asking of a phantom—this distant familiarity she felt upon seeing it. Time and time again had she felt this formless recognition she could not name. Someone must have told her once, or twice, or multiple times, but she could recall none of them at the moment.

The girl, however, assumed she referred to the material object. "Something great. If you are sad, or have ever been sad, this—this solely—shall take away your need for it at all." She smiled honestly, smiled wondrously. The dull red disappeared as her fist closed once more.

Stepping to the side, the girl knelt to her knees, parting the grass away from a little patch of dirt. Her hand a gentle claw, she scuffed at the earth, hardly an inch deep, before tunneling the bead in place and burying it. Standing forth and guiding Noelle several feet back, she clasped her hands into a prayer. "Let us proceed. Let us banish what makes one sad, and all that causes unfounded grief. Let us be grateful for the friends we have been given"—she spared a smile towards Noelle—"and the great things we shall see."

A wind started. Noelle did not know it was there because she could feel it, but rather because the field of grass around them billowed and bowed about in great waves. A caressing touch to her chin, from the girl, guided her gaze back to the little patch of earth they stood in front of, lost amongst the sea of grass.

That was, until, with a gnarl and twist, a flag of a stem protruded above it all, peaking distinctly above the surrounding grass. The stem then wove itself into the trunk of a small tree, and this tree grew lively, nimble and soundly, quicker than the raw eye could comprehend. Noelle, watching intently, felt her eyes widen. From this trunk sprouted little fingers—spindly branches, and from those branches sprouted sticky leaves.

This Frauwood tree—this monument that rose above the endless plains spun proudly and continued to spin until it settled a good dozen feet high. It loomed over the two of them, curious as a guiding beacon could be. Something of its posture, of its instantaneous appearance, something of it all caused a great swell of emotion within Noelle, her eyes watering.

Beside, the girl fell to kneel, her nose an inch from the earth. Noelle followed in tandem. And when the girl smiled, Noelle smiled too.

"Do you see now?" asked the girl, her eyes of genuine joy, her voice laced with compassion. "A reason is something to be created. A pedestal too, a God, perhaps, as we bow beneath this moment. Do you not feel odd bowing to a tree? But it clearly does not matter whether it is a tree, or the Frau Thamar herself standing over you, because neither of them ever gave life in the first place, as those silly books say. Ha!—All those silly reasons and silly things that have brought ruin upon our lives in pursuit of them." She turned towards Noelle. "Does this cure you of your sadness, of your apathy? Does finding the truth, albeit one you just created, fill that depression within you?" Her eyes glistened passionately.

Noelle, after hearing her inquiry, smiled bitterly, the wind and grass in her face, pausing a moment before responding. "It does. It almost does."

"And that's enough for me," said the girl, her smile mellowing.

Noelle exited her kneel, sitting atop the flattened grass, and the two friends continued to watch the Frauwood tree and the thousands of its little branches, clustering like ropes in tar and resin. For a while the tree did not grow and remained quite still, even as the wind around continued to blow along the textured horizon, and a little farther along a black dot, the farmhouse mansion the girl had pointed out a while back.

Noelle watched this scene in fragments, this obituary of her mind and all its scattered sightings and lost desires. *This* was what it was, all of it all at once. What she could not recall, what she could not name, for the moment it was spotted, all that was left in its wake was a fleeting recognition. And was it really disappointing that it was all to fit in a fold of buckram, each sentiment as irrelevant as the last?

She listened to this scene as though told, as though written. The leaves of the Frauwood tree began to darken, and Noelle feared they were to rot, until they settled at a grounding shade of red. Even then, she sighed a little mournfully, unable to appreciate the color, the small flutter, knowing what was to come shortly after.

And surely enough, as though pressed into paper time and time again, the thousands of leaves were plucked from their branches and pulled down to be swallowed amongst the raving grass. It happened all at once, a little too unnaturally, but it was never something to be appreciated anyway. As the last leaf vanished, disappearing into the swarming masses, the entire sky fell dark, field blending with sky.

"Look," the girl said, pointing towards a bramble of nearly indistinguishable shapes in the sky. Noelle soon found that she pointed towards the tree, and squinting, saw several amorphous shapes—what appeared to be little bulbs—hanging amidst the spindly branches of the tree. She could not ever recall having seen such bulbs on a Frauwood tree.

"I don't recognize those."

A hum of agreement. "Perhaps not yet." And when Noelle turned to glance at the girl in question, she was startled to see two eyes stand out within

the encompassing dark—like little beads, an alignment of two fulgent stars—in each iris, a perpetual swirl of gray and ash.

***

Renzo woke to the sound of foghorns. They rattled at the loose window above his head, thrummed at the floor and frame of his bed. He endeavored to ignore it entirely, what was likely to be yet another fever dream, a sick product of his imagination. However, such sounds were always to be drawn out for what seemed an eternity in a state of half-sleep, and just as Renzo forfeited his attempts to remain in bed, a screw of the window popped off, clattering onto the sill and rolling onto his face.

Quickly sitting upright, he caught it and wearily palmed it in his hands, looking past his shoulder at the window. The sky was a blinding white. As if on cue, the foghorns sounded once more. Renzo narrowed his eyes.

Reaching forth to twist the screw back in place, he dressed himself, shivering, then exited his room, leaving his hair down untied. He paused an instance, standing outside the door where his mother slept. There seemed not a noise, and Renzo assumed she had not yet woken in spite of the foghorns. Hastily throwing a coat over himself, he slipped past the kitchen and opened the front door, shutting it carefully behind.

At this point in time, although the foghorns had stopped, Renzo felt sure they had been no mere result of his redundant dreams and maladies. Running down the sidewalk, he crossed the empty street without looking, paced through an alleyway of dead shops and businesses, and soon approached the barbershop, and by extension the harbor.

Still standing a distance away, he scoured the expanse of the harbor, squinted and searched for a ship, but found nothing at all. It was not until he walked forth a little more, rounding a cabin, that a small sailboat came into view, docked at the very edge. There were clearly people onboard, but Renzo had not expected such a small boat to be the source of a loud foghorn.

Approaching carefully, he soon found there were hardly five people onboard, perhaps even less. What could have warranted a trip at such a time to such a place? The boat itself was unfamiliar, clearly not local; the sails were not standard-issued, the cockpit was large enough to be a living quarter, eliminating the possibility of a rogue fishing boat.

One of the men spotted Renzo amongst the empty harbor, and calling out something indistinguishable, waved him over, appearing unhostile. Still cautious, Renzo walked along the dock towards the boat, his steps measured. As he neared, the man's words became coherent enough for Renzo to conclude they spoke a language he could not understand, albeit a familiar one.

The man seemed to come to this conclusion as well, and he gestured for Renzo to wait as he strode past the deck to fetch something, or rather someone. There soon emerged a girl with flaxen hair, which, beneath the daylight appeared almost white, and she accompanied the old man back towards Renzo, who waited with uncertainty.

She appeared somewhat familiar, yet all the same Renzo was sure he had never met her before. Smiling timidly, hands clasped behind her back, the girl leaned forward to speak. "Have you, by any chance, heard of somebody named Kolya Vasilev in this town?"

Renzo tensed, refraining from jumping to conclusions, attempting to recall an old conversation, and only upon realizing his silence hastened a response. "I—yes? I am not sure," he said, wincing at his words. He did not know of Kolya's surname, but it was, in a way, possible due to the fact the girl would appear familiar to Renzo. However, was it not that Kolya had claimed his family was not to arrive until after—unless?

"I'm sorry," Renzo said to the hopeful pair, "please excuse me for a moment to fetch someone." Before seeing to their agreement, he fled a little desperately away from the harbor and to the residential area behind the shops, entering a communal boarding house, aware that everybody was still likely to be asleep. He located Kolya's bunk and shook him awake, sparing little to no explanation before guiding his drowsy steps down the stairs. Kolya, though thoroughly confused, seemed to understand the urgency of the situation.

As they returned to the harbor, Renzo became terribly anxious, his steps stiff and erratic, for who was he to draw such conclusions? If he was wrong—he did not want to think if he was wrong. He walked towards the docks thinking nothing, presuming nothing at all to spare himself in the occurrence of an un-thought situation. He did not have such resolve to walk there *knowingly*, Kolya following behind. He required his own stagnance of thinking to go through with his actions—and how unfamiliar it felt!

"Kolya!" Renzo was hooked from the depths of his senses by a call from the girl, who sprinted towards the both of them, her hair flying behind through wisps of wind, footsteps rattling the dock. It was then that the realization set in, moments after registering what she had said. Kolya paled dramatically.

"Ihya?" It left his lips in a whisper, stunned, as his sister embraced him compassionately, head tucked in his shoulder. Renzo looked away stiffly, hands wavering to his side in a weary anticipation of what this would mean.

After they broke apart, with no other apparent plan on hand, Kolya and Renzo were invited onto the ship, encountering several of the other men onboard, most of whom paid little attention to them, considering their arrival a job done. Kolya still seemed to not have recovered, and said nothing until they were seated in the modest living quarters.

"Why are there no ships in the harbor, Kolya?" the girl questioned curiously, hands resting in her lap. "That is not how you described Port Octavia at all." Kolya did not seem to hear any of what she said.

"Why are you here, Ihya?" He did not stutter, but there was an underlying tremor in his voice. In contrast to Kolya's sullen demeanor, his sister beamed, then said, "You did not write for months. Such is what happens after you have been in a foreign place too long. It is all too common amongst those who have left our town, and I decided to pay you a visit to remind you of our family."

If anything, Kolya paled more. "You did not receive my letter? I sent it at the start of summer, it must have arrived before you departed."

"Seaborne postal service was canceled in August," Renzo recalled abruptly. "The letters on the last round may have barely just been cut off—the ship, due to bad weather, may have just docked farther north, and delivery would be indefinitely delayed." He regretted speaking upon seeing several pairs of eyes turn to him.

The girl carefully asked, "What was it that you wanted to tell me, Kolya? Why are there no ships in the harbor?" Kolya could not speak. The shadows of his eyes running deep, his shoulders uneven, he could not muster anything to say. Renzo, frowning, answered instead.

"There is a hurricane here," he began quietly. "Or, rather, there is to be a hurricane, soon." His claim sounded weak even to his own ears.

Defiant, Ihya settled a hand on her hip. "Then why are we not running right now, this instance? This is not a safe place to be before or during a hurricane. And, yet, the waters, currently, are for the most part, calm, with no indication of a storm. The wind is strong, but not alarming. Tell me, how soon, exactly?"

Renzo closed his eyes and admitted defeat. "There was a notice in June. And again in August. Most who moved out did so early on. The harbor was cleared, but not blockaded, yet commerce has been indefinitely paused. Half of the town is running about as usual, if it is a good day. But when the winds start, most families will board up their windows and wait it out."

"And there has been no hurricane yet," Ihya finished eloquently.

"Most essentially."

Ihya then inquired, "Will there be a hurricane?" Renzo blinked and did not understand. "Do *you* think there will be a hurricane?" she clarified. Only then did Renzo notice Kolya was looking at him for an answer as well. He detested the way they watched him, as though he knew anything at all.

Swallowing, closing his eyes, he muttered, "I do not know. I do not know—at all, I do not lean towards one side in the slightest. Do not ask me. I am not fit to be asked." Renzo did not dare open his eyes. He did not want to see their prodding eyes, their disbelieving expressions. Because Renzo did, in fact, possess an answer to Ihya's question. And speaking it from the depths of

his mind, the depths of deranged mind, would contribute nothing at all. He heard no response.

It was with an utmost sorrowful faith, that in common moments such as these, he wished but to live—to see, to hear, to think—for now they had had all the blessing within them drained from. A familiar itch prickled at his palm, a most careless type of impulse. Renzo was reminded of a singular day back during the mildewed summer months, a day which he remembered unclearly until now.

He had been strolling alone along the dirtied harbor, walkway strung with sodden notes, debts, and papers that had since been washed away. He had been feeling particularly ambitious, oddly prideful of his solitude in a twisted manner, all due to a recent development. It was not unusual for him to show promise academically, it was, however, unusual for his instructors to care about it.

He was a silent student. He was also an arrogant student. Not arrogant enough not to know of it, but enough that, in his eyes, he was not understood, at least not yet. It was that very day he was to meet with Professor Lithgow, and from the moment he woke, he was too restless to wait idly. And pacing, nonetheless waiting, in the midst of his growing solitude, atop the planks of a dirty urban settlement, must have been what bred his ruin.

He saw it first in a flash from the corner of his eye, a slash of red. He turned to see on an outdated bulletin board, painted in a bitter red, the letters, “INTELLECTUAL THOUGHT BREEDS CORRUPTION.” Renzo thought nothing of it initially. Seeing this was not rare, nor upsetting. But at some point, after pacing past it half a dozen more times, he felt an irritation creep from beneath his skin.

These damned words—how ironic it was that it was these damned words that would corrupt his mind. He attempted to reason their meaning, he attempted to draw a definite claim above over the latter, he tried but to vanish the thought, as he should have, for Renzo hated vanishing thoughts. They were a vulnerability.

His feet drew him away along the dock, a path he had already frequented many times before. And it must have been in the midst of his fervid thinking, that he did not pay attention to where his foot landed, the sole of his shoe snagged by a nail, and suddenly flailing, he fell to his side and tumbled into the shallow water.

His immediate instinct was to climb back up, but he did not expect the cool rush of water over his clothing and skin to momentarily stagnate his thinking. And all it took, was a fleeting and foolish thought of *what if?*—before the water flooded his rationale as easily as it did his eyes, and away he sunk into a state of a twisted relaxation he had never experienced before.

In the present, Renzo recalled this sensation more accurately than he thought capable, though still the itch did not reside. A little sad, he opened his eyes and saw both Kolya and Ihya turned away, facing the window. He looked, too, and saw the white sky, a most grounding shade of white that anchored him to one mind, one dream.

"School is to start soon," Kolya said dully.

"Yes, it is." Renzo wrung his hands. He knew his response to Ihya's question had gone further than it needed, that it troubled them if anything at all. It was either that, or they thought him a little paranoid, a little mad. Renzo preferred the latter. "Where will you go?" he asked, addressing Ihya.

She turned. "Am I allowed to follow?"

"You should be," Kolya confirmed. With a dull resolve, the three of them ventured from the ship and away from the harbor, splitting ways at the alley of shops. Renzo returned to his house to dress himself and prepare for school, just as his mother began to stir, unaware of all that had unfolded that morning.

His arrival at the Phoenician was insignificant in a way that he walked unacknowledged by most and did not bother to look for those that did. He did, however unintentionally, stumble upon Kolya and Ihya, who shared a table in the lobby, exchanging small conversation within the bustling atmosphere.

For a while he watched, and sought to leave, until Kolya did first, excusing himself but leaving his bag on the chair. What could have pressed him to remain was unknown, yet Renzo waited in anticipation, narrowing his eyes towards the doors. It was Noelle. She entered as she always did, staring surreally at the building as though it were her first time, and her gaze—as accurately as Renzo could predict by the angle of her head—roamed the ceiling before suddenly settling on Ihya, or rather her flaxen locks of hair.

There was no mistake of it. Noelle suddenly appeared startled in every feature visible, approaching Ihya's direction rapidly, yet timidly. She stopped right in front of the other, and Ihya looked up, confused but curious. "Hello." Noelle did not respond.

As a matter of fact, she stood deathly pale and still, fists clenched below the cuff of her sleeves, her jaw set. She wore such a frightening expression even Ihya's smile wavered and dropped, her demeanor clearly unsettled. There was perhaps more fear in knowing that Noelle had never once approached someone in that fashion; it had been early on established the type of person she was, but however much a harmless person.

Renzo unconsciously made his way to the table, and his arrival seemed to greatly relieve Ihya, who nodded at him in greeting. Renzo tapped Noelle on the shoulder. "Noelle?" She turned to look at him—and there it was again: the ill pallor in her cheeks, but along with that an unmistakable expression of confusion and hurt.

"Noelle?" he repeated. "We ought to get to class soon." It was a slight lie. There were still nine minutes left before the bell, but taking advantage of Noelle's poor sense of time seemed hardly a bad choice at this moment. Nodding dimly, Noelle followed Renzo's lead away from Ihya and towards the foyer.

Their walk towards Miss Karpel's classroom was silent and unburdened in the worst aspect possible. When they entered, the classroom was still primarily empty, and Noelle said nothing of this as she took a seat. Renzo opted to read his book, which had as of late become more for show than purpose.

As they waited, Miss Karpel heaved boxes through and about the classroom, polished the surface of her desk, and proceeded through a multitude of trifles, appearing far busier than usual. Renzo, his mind in a dazed state, weakly attempted to gather his thoughts and recall whether anything important could have been taking place that day, but alas, he arrived at no conclusion.

It was not long before the tin bell rang and the last of the students shuffled into the classroom, Miss Karpel closing the door and addressing the class. “Good morning. I hope you all had a restful weekend and remembered your safety glasses.” Renzo put down his book. “Today’s lab will account for the majority of class, so please leave your desks clear of anything but perhaps a pencil.”

Miss Karpel headed towards her desk, which had been shifted towards the middle of the classroom, several objects atop on display. “Your safety glasses are here to protect your eyes from ultraviolet light, even if the source is not in close proximity. Do not remove them until specified. Raise your hand if you require a pair.” Renzo raised his hand without shame, more invested in what the experiment would be. From the corner of his eye, he observed that Noelle did not switch out her own pair for the class standard set. Likely because her own pair was made to protect from more than ultraviolet light.

At her desk, Miss Karpel expanded a large diagram, hooking the ends to a frame, then began a brief lecture. “I have the pleasure of presenting something new to this class that I had expected to present years ago, all due to a severely delayed shipping in your favor. This,” she said, holding a small vial to the class, “is an unnamed mineral only a few years old in the science industry. It was introduced by accident through the crystallization of a tampered solution, and its properties are only half-understood.

“However, it has been confirmed, following several tests, that it is free from toxins and only combustible under unreasonable temperatures, approving it for classroom demonstration. We will be testing its flammable properties, which, according to circulating reports, is the most notable discovery of the

mineral so far. To save any unnecessary trouble, we will be referring to it by a placeholder name—upsilon."

Miss Karpel continued her lecture a little longer, delving into the specifications of the experiment, and the observations they were to note. The entire class appeared eager and exceptionally excited, in contrast to the recent sullen mood of the school—a product of the devastating depression the town had fallen into.

The lights were flicked off; the shades were drawn. An old ventilating system, after sputtering in intervals, gradually hummed to its full power, vibrating the air and irritating Renzo's ears. As instructed, the students surrounded Miss Karpel's desk to watch, leaving a safety radius of several feet. Miss Karpel herself began the setup of the experiment, placing the flint and steel to the side, emptying the vial of upsilon into a thin metal canister. Turning the valve of the gas pipe, she lit the barrel and soon a small but steady flame emerged.

Very carefully, she lowered the canister on a wire frame, and almost immediately a scalding sound could be heard echoing within it. Shortly after, a thin wire was dipped into a separate solution then dabbed into the contents of the canister.

All of a sudden, just mere milliseconds after the wire had been removed, a sharp flame burst straight from the canister an entire foot high. From where he stood, it should have only taken a fraction of his vision, but, with frightening speed, it spiked across in stalactites, threatening at the edges of his peripheral vision. All of it was white and he saw the veins of his own eyes in blue—it was Neptune, it was Pluto, it was the carnal pleasure of staring at the sun and nothing else.

He could hardly tell he wore safety glasses, that there was a barrier between his eyes and the sun at all. Feeling blinded, Renzo quickly raised his hand to his eyes, turning his head away. His heart thundered, his chest nauseous and worn, and a flash of fear spiked when the white shock of his vision did not initially dissipate.

When it did, however, he looked around and saw many of his other classmates had turned away as well. The surrounding classroom, in its rectangular glory, had never appeared as disproportionate as their shadows grew monstrous and raved wildly across the walls. Renzo stood rooted to the ground, both firm and disconnected, waiting it out, the stroboscopic walls flashing before his eyes.

He did not process that the flame had died out even as the walls went blank. He did not process that the lights had been flicked back on, that the ventilator had been shut down. He did see, though, from the corner of his eye, Noelle with two fingers on the bridge of her glasses, pushing them back up, but his mind was stunted and still he stood, facing the walls.

Someone was tapping his shoulder. Someone was tapping his shoulder, weren't they? Renzo slowly drew his gaze to his side and saw Kolya, staring at him, concerned. He did not like that expression. Renzo heaved in a heavy breath, rattling his lungs, and turning heel, returned to his seat.

"That was bright, wasn't it?"

"Yep! It's a shame I looked away early, I didn't see how high it got." Laughter and conversation trickled through the surface of the classroom, but no alarm of any kind that Renzo had expected. Nobody was shaken. Nobody was unsettled. Renzo twisted the skin on his finger, staring straight ahead.

"It was a pretty color—kind of white and blue."

"Ah, for me it was mostly white, seemed pretty bright." Yes, nobody was shaken. Nobody was unsettled.

Now that he thought of it, it seemed strange nobody else had woken from the foghorns from that morning. Not a soul outside, no twitching shutters or fleeting whispers as he had made his way to the harbor. His house was not necessarily far from the harbor, but it was not the closest either. Renzo was a sensitive sleeper, though perhaps more sensitive than he had been aware.

And now, just now, moments after the experiment, nobody was shaken. Nobody reacted violently, or in any fashion similar to that of Renzo. His perception—could it have all been wrong, in some twisted manner? Did he not see correctly, hear correctly, perceive correctly? He may have been right,

earlier that morning. He was not fit to be asked, to answer any questions including that very one. He was not fit to see, to hear, to observe anything correctly.

A memory of his compiled data—the data he had begun with the support of Patrick—flashed through his mind. It must have been wrong, all of it. It was the scientific finding of a madman, of a retard. Renzo, smiling bitterly, wrangled at his fingers painfully. He would have continued further had it not been for an interruption.

"You say you cannot see?" It was the voice of Miss Karpel, each word hardly controlled. The rest of the class fell silent.

Noelle, whom the question had been directed to, held a hand to her eyes. "I don't know." Grasped by the wrist, she was dragged out of the classroom and into the hall, the door shut behind Miss Karpel. The class listened diligently.

"Foolish girl! What could have warranted you to take such action!" Several girls giggled. The urgent footsteps soon disappeared along the hall, and the students began to talk, at first in whispers and soon in slander. Renzo and Kolya sat next to each other, silent, as they listened to their peers.

"It's terrible such a thing happened," said one girl.

"Absolutely terrible," the other agreed.

"We ought to spare a moment of silence. For all the retards hiding amongst us."

"For all the retards hiding amongst us!"

Beside him, Kolya began to cry.

***

Throughout the following days, the wind began to pick up in unprecedented intervals, at least as written in Renzo's data. Small notes could be found in the margins, written in loopy, careless handwriting. *We have a hurricane in the midst!* His supposed apathy was not always quite as it appeared, however.

Cayetana Esmilia vividly recalled an instance in which he had attempted to bring both Kolya and Noelle to her barbershop in tow, but ultimately returned alone. Kolya, running an errand with his sister, had apologized profusely, and Noelle's presence, unsurprisingly, had become even more erratic than before.

She had not gone blind. The following day of the incident, she still traversed the halls without assistance, still remained in her seat for the duration of class, but Miss Karpel showed visible signs of distress, training an eye on her throughout the day. There was usually not much to see. She could, most times, be seen slumped motionless at her desk, not appearing unhappy or bored, but utterly devoid of human expression. She did not meet Ihya again.

And so, without anybody to accompany him home, Renzo found himself strolling along the harbor once more. He was not there for a reason, nor had he simply unconsciously walked there. He was not there to accomplish anything, and he was fully aware of this. He was a passerby, albeit a slower one, only there to see what would appear.

He spotted flyers torn and watered away beyond eligibility, and he only understood them for he had read them before. There was, too, the red paint reading "INTELLECTUAL THOUGHT BREEDS CORRUPTION," though it now appeared far duller than before, and Renzo was required to actively look for it to find it. He stood before the bulletin board and observed for a while, before moving on.

A few more paces away were the docks, lined out ominously with only one boat in sight. Was it not here that he, along with many others, had come upon, by accident or intention? It was no longer a matter of moving forward. It was only a matter of going back.

Renzo turned and walked to the end of the dock, checked that the boat was uninhabited, before taking a seat at the ledge, his feet hanging off. From there, he began to mentally list off all that he had heard, seen, or felt in the past weeks. For a moment he paused in regret that he was without a journal to record them.

Nonetheless, he continued and managed all the way back to the past month before returning stumped. And what, exactly, he found amongst these disordered collections was no relation at all. There was no connection. There was no progression.

There may have been connection and progression if he made an effort to form them, but treated raw, there was no connection or progression to see. If, Renzo thought, he lived alone, in a world in which *he* was the absolute presence, then perhaps there would be such connection to see. However, where he sat now, atop a dock atop a sea, he was strung out in pieces and lacking the form others possessed.

This was why he regarded Noelle with such envy. She was, by common terms, equally if not more disconnected than him. But, from Noelle's perspective of interest, there was no such thing as connection or progression. There was no existence either. There was nothing, or there was something, and a perception of each. Renzo could not accept their abstract and fleeting existence. He could not change the way he thought and rationalized.

And, so here he sat, atop a dock atop the sea, with no definite or sensical conclusion. Wallowing, Renzo remained until the wind became unbearable and drove him back home. Pulling out from his bag the pile of compiled data, he raised the wind level a notch and scribbled a few last notes before tossing it aside. There was one sheet of cardstock left.

Chapter 10: Yes, dreaming.

Noelle remembered a valley. A sloped valley with tresses of grass bowed inwards, with little trickles and streams webbed out into each step. A valley that made shadows; a valley that allowed somebody to walk out of sight. This may have been the first mistake Alaya Favre made.

A valley didn't need a ceiling to cast a complete, encompassing shadow. Did one make an active choice to enter a valley? Or, was it the valley that moved, that shifted linearly past one's shoulders, and encompassed the width of their shadow—two inches, three, six, seven! Who was it that moved? Noelle could not tell, she could not tell when watching the shadow shift.

Noelle lay on her bed, her hand above her eyes, shifting here, there, then here again. Her sunglasses were discarded to the side, the temples folded and resting askew on the blanket. It was somewhat dim outside, the sun obscured by overlapping layers of vapor. Even so, each time Noelle tilted her head towards the window, she winced from the sharp, white spikes, her pupils contracting to the minimum aperture.

Laying her head back down, she exhaled lightly, reached for her sunglasses and placed them back over her eyes. In the midst of rolling off her bed, she paused, however, to stare at her nightstand. A fine layer of dust had settled upon the line of red beads. Though, as she reached with two hands to pick it up, a small plume tilted off, revealing their radiant color once more.

Still holding onto the ends of the string, Noelle stood and exited her room. She headed a little ways down the corridor towards the stairs, but halted upon remembering something she had not done. Noelle placed the precarious line of beads on the hand railing of the stairs. Then, she turned heel and approached the dark set of mahogany doors.

As though protocol, she knocked four times before swinging the doors open, peering in and resisting the urge of cough from the dust in the air. It smelled slightly rancid—the expected result of a person living in a room for

weeks upon months. “Grandma?” she called out carefully, holding finger across her nostrils. “Grandma? I’m going out.”

The old woman seemed to stir beneath the covers, and after a long while produced a small slip of paper, hand appearing from below the flap of the blanket. Taking it, Noelle’s eyes flicked over the message:

Alright, don’t forget your sunglasses. Are you coming back?

Her lips pressed into a thin line, Noelle placed the sheet back into the grasp of the waiting hand, and without leaving an answer, exited the room, shutting the door behind. She heard no further movement from within the room—the old woman did nothing at all, said nothing at all, and made no attempt to stand and move.

Huffing slightly, fists lightly clenched, Noelle headed down the stairs and towards the front door. She took each step with apathy, the soft light from the stained glass windows gradually graying with approach. Deeper and deeper the colors went, as did their volume. At last she stopped, a foot away from the handle, sparing her decision one final thought.

“If I am to fall asleep,” Noelle said to herself, “it shan’t be here. Not here at all.” With that, she opened the door, closing it from behind, and set off away from the neighborhood, along the alleys. First she followed the route she regularly took to school, visiting the Phoenician.

When she arrived, she did not enter the building and in fact stood a fair distance away, finding the same spot she had initially observed the building from the first time. How long ago it seemed, during the last rays of summer, when she had rounded the trees and spotted the glass structure, only half-visible during dawn.

Now the path was dirtied and damp, a moderate humidity in the air, and a strong scent of sour soil. Both the glass structure and the remaining building were hardly visible amongst the drifting vapors. She hesitated before settling on a series of carefully selected words.

“Why do I talk to you?” Noelle asked the distant building. “This isn’t so much a conversation as it is a monologue. Yet I would talk to you every day I came, I would bade you a ‘hello’ or ‘goodbye’ without any rounded

exchange. Your appearance reminds me of many things I've heard before, and I would always tell you of it if I thought of it. You would listen."

Noelle narrowed her eyes. "You were a good friend. You never said anything. But all that amounted to was an entertainment of my own thought. I'd prefer to fool myself into talking to a friend who supposedly talks back. Meaning, this may be a goodbye—but even then, I wish the best for you, in interest of my own solace. And while you may be inanimate, I wish for you a life of longevity."

She remained standing there a while longer, then left. Next, Noelle visited the harbor. There, she found the winds rooted from a brewing storm, waves of mist running along the sand and shadowing the sky. In interest of time, she did not take off her boots and climbed down straight onto the shore.

Upon the shore lay scattered debris, whole branches and limbs half-buried, fragmented shells with interspaces of money and change. Due to high tide, Noelle did not go any further, squinting through the sea spray, carefully observing what she could see of the sea. It was a gray mass, lumbering at the edges if there were any at all. And, for all that it offered, it was not forever. Neither was the sun.

"I am without option." Noelle pulled from her pocket the leather journal, flipping through it a last time, taking care to minimize its exposure to the mist. All the pages were present but one. She must have left it at the navy mansion on her bed. Mentally confirming this fact, Noelle then dug a hole in the sand, placing the journal within. She took off her raincoat, folded it into a compact square, and laid it on top, before covering it all with more sand.

Bracing the cold, Noelle climbed back up the rocks and started away from the harbor. She passed by Renzo's mother's barbershop, as well as all the remaining businesses of the aisle. Soon she approached the intersection, the main road. She carried no provisions on herself—no food, no personal possession, and now little clothing.

A while later she reached the outskirts of Port Octavia, following the main road devoid of any carriages or wagons. She walked along the gutter, even as the trees beside her grew taller, even as the undergrowth formed into

denser patches, at some points obstructing her path. The wind was weaker further into the mainland, but the cold still resided.

And when the sun, which had been hardly present in the first place, sunk past the horizon, and her shadow disappeared amongst the valley of trees, still she walked along the gutter.

***

There was no resistance in the manner he woke. It was odd, having woken after a completed dream, albeit one he could not remember. It was pleasurable, one could say, but also unsettling, Renzo would add. He hardly ever completed his dreams. Here he stood and dressed himself as he did every morning, tying his hair and brushing his teeth, departing twenty minutes before eight.

It became clear something was not right as he approached the Phoenician. For one, it seemed oddly empty, the school often at least half-full by the time of his arrival. That wasn't to say there weren't any people inside at all, and the lights within the building were clearly on, but otherwise Renzo saw no students walking behind or in front of himself.

As he entered the lobby, he made way for the only person he saw—a scraggly man that appeared to be an official or officer of some sort. Tapping him on the shoulder, Renzo inquired, "Excuse me sir, may I ask what time it is?"

The officer, who had apparently not seen him, flinched violently and jumped around, one hand pressing his cap to his head. "Good lord, boy! What's a kid like you doing here?"

Renzo blinked. "Is there no school, today?"

"My God," heaved the officer, brushing himself down. "By all means there is no school today. Did you not see the distributed flyers? Taped to each door?" Renzo remained silent. "Did you not think to yourself, as you were walking here, that the weather seemed a little—just a little dangerous?" Renzo

glanced at the windows and found the sky a dark gray and the trees tossing about hysterically.

"I—I did notice," he lied. "Not the flyers, though. I was occupied."

Running a hand down his face, the officer sighed. "Ah, well, it can't be helped. You ought to stay here a bit until the storm calms down, we wouldn't want any unwarranted accidents. Name's Cornell, I work as a government official of this disaster of a town."

"Why are you here?" Renzo asked, resting his bag against his chair and promptly taking a seat.

There appeared a pained expression on Cornell's face. "I've taken roster of all students that attend. Earlier, we had several officials go door to door to account for each student, but we still have a damn good portion left. Honestly!—what use is an identification file without an address? As I said, as I said, this town is going to the ruins!"

Unable to resist the urge, Renzo further inquired, "May I see the list? I may recognize one of them as my classmate." Sighing, the officer nodded and carelessly swept a list of papers in front of him. Cornell had not exaggerated. There was an unprecedented length of names on the list of unaccounted students, and only a select few had been crossed out.

Renzo found none of his classmates, skimmed through most names without a trace of familiarity, and was ready to hand it back until he saw "Noelle Favre" hastily scribbled at the bottom of the page. Cornell must have seen him tense, for he walked forth and peered past Renzo's shoulder, and said, "Which one?"

"'Noelle,' right there," replied Renzo, pointing at where it was written. "I know where she lives."

The officer clapped his hands together. "Excellent. Thank you. When the weather calms down, I'll escort you back to your house, and in the process we'll stop by her house." In the meantime, he took back the papers, and letting out a groan, returned to his tedious work with a pen and a notepad.

"Why are so many without addresses?" Renzo asked curiously.

"Mm? Ah, well I suppose there are two reasons for that. The first is our immigrant population, or any misfortunate soul that only planned to stay temporarily. They live in communal bunks—the lot of them. They move around, too, and there is simply no way to find where they have gone afterwards. The second is our *very* dear squatter population. You do remember the Ford family that moved out before summer? People around have been moving into their mansion rent-free—we all know that the Ford family ain't coming back."

"Squatters?" Renzo asked foreignly, thinking of Noelle.

"Yes, squatters. Little men that take unoccupied land without legal permission, and there is no hope in knowing where they live if they were never registered in the first place." Wasn't it strange, Renzo thought, that Professor Lithgow had known Noelle's address without an identification file at hand? However, he did not inquire Cornell any further and resolved to investigate this later himself.

In the meanwhile, having brought nothing but his usual bookbag, he pulled out the book he had not read more than the first ten pages of, and finding himself in an odd mood, with nothing to listen to but the occasional scratch of the officer's pen, Renzo started the next chapter.

It was a memoir written by a little girl during the hurricane of 5332, and not particularly useful to his project for it only contained occasional sentimental notes, or small accounts of life during the hurricane. Yet, still, Renzo did not scoff once as he read, and did not force himself not to scoff either. He read without struggle, soon twenty, then thirty pages in. Perhaps this was it. Perhaps he had reached the level of carelessness required to enjoy a book.

However, the moment this thought flicked through his mind, his pace stagnated and he was unable to read once more. Sighing, Renzo closed the book. He found himself reminded of something Professor Lithgow had mentioned long ago.

"*A purely theoretical concept. One, in which a human is alive, their blood is flowing, their brain is about and functioning, but they are without consciousness, without thought.*"

When he had first heard it, he had dismissed it as an obvious and counterproductive concept. Now, though, he had never once longed more for his eyes to dull, for his vision to overwhelm, and cease all the corrupted thoughts of the intellectual mind. It was not a wish to die. It was a wish to think differently, to think *better*. It was illogical, and it did not make sense. This was the only conclusion of the concept Renzo could make in such a mind, despite all that he longed for it.

Cornell tapped him on the shoulder, drawing him away from his thoughts. "Are you ready? A window of calm weather has opened, enough time for you to return safely." Nodding dimly, Renzo returned his book back to his bag, slung it over his shoulder, and followed Cornell to the entrance. From there, they exited the building, and walking at a cautious and hasty pace, Renzo led the way to his neighborhood, entering through a side road detour to reach Noelle's house first.

"Hm." Cornell stood impressed, hands on his hips, gazing up at the navy mansion. "What a piece of work." Renzo knocked briskly, but to his unease the door did not immediately open. The officer scoffed, landing a hand on Renzo's shoulder. "Hah! You call that a knock, my boy? I'll show you how we get them bastards to wake up."

Cornell directed two thundering blows to the door, Renzo resisting the urge to flinch. And they waited. No one came to attend the door.

"Odd," mused Cornell. "You're sure this was the right house?"

"Yes," Renzo confirmed. "I'm sure."

"Ah, good God. This is what I meant. There is simply no way to track where they live. Anyway, assuming that this house was occupied by squatters, there shouldn't be any harm in seeing if anyone's inside." Following behind warily, Cornell opened the unlocked door and stepped inside. "Officer Cornell of the third executive division, entering!" he called out. "If you are present and mobile, please show yourself right now and provide identification!"

Once more, there was no response. Nodding, Cornell continued into the house, glancing past the rooms. “Looks like your friend moved out, kid. These rooms are all empty. Doesn’t seem like anyone lives here.”

Renzo responded, “It’s always been like that. There was never anything in here even when Noelle was inside.” When the first floor had been thoroughly inspected, they headed up the stairs, the rotted wood creaking beneath the officer’s heavy steps. If uneasy before, Renzo was now positively agitated. He had never once thought of what was upstairs, and an ominous dread settled over his shoulders as the lighting grew dimmer and dimmer.

Upon initial appearance, it seemed that the second floor was uninhabited as well, for all the doors were left open, revealing nothing inside. All but one. Cornell spotted the closed set of mahogany doors, at the far end of the hall. Approaching slowly, Cornell followed protocol, calling out his warning once again, and knocked at the door.

To their surprise, a feeble but incoherent voice emerged from the room. Cranking the doors open, they were immediately hit by a musty and sour smell, an old woman found to be sitting at the edge of her bed, eyeing them attentively. Her outgrown gray hair hung in matted rags, her threadbare clothing encircled her weak frame, clearly unwashed, and her gaunt eyes stared up at them, still and unmoving.

Renzo felt a watery bile rise to his throat; the type of fear one could feel even when staring at a most vulnerable person. Cornell regained his composure quickly. “I apologize, ma’am, for entering your house, but we are here to confirm our roster of students at the Phoenician before the hurricane arrives. May I ask if a Noelle Favre lives or lived here?”

The old woman, even through the state of her voice and body, managed to sound somewhat affirmative. “Yes. She lived here. She left the other day.”

“The other day?” exclaimed the officer, failing to mask his shock. “What reason did she have to leave, and of all days yesterday?”

To this the old woman provided no answer. “What business do you have here?” she spoke earnestly, thinly, having worn her voice. “As I’m sure you know, this is not my house.”

“At such a time, we have no use for incarceration or legal punishment. All we ask is that you sign several documents about your information, as well as your granddaughter’s, and we shall potentially escort you somewhere safer afterwards.”

At this time, Renzo, who had never stepped foot into the room in the first place, turned back to observe the rest of the second floor, which no longer appeared as ominous as before. Still he treaded carefully, heading a little ways down the hall to the south quarters. As Cornell had mentioned, most rooms were devoid of any furniture or belonging, except one in the corner, in which there appeared to be a low poster bed and nightstand.

Opening the door entirely, Renzo called out, “Noelle?” Logically, there was no reason for him to do so. According to the old woman, she was not here—and where she could have been, he knew nothing of. Entering the room, he found there was nothing to intrude on, for it contained no personalization whatsoever, a simple white comforter on the bed, a layer of dust atop the nightstand.

However, approaching a little closer, Renzo spotted the corner of a piece of paper sticking out from the duvet, without showing any indication of having been placed there purposely. He reached out and took hold of it, quickly recognizing the color and size of it to belong to Noelle’s journal.

And flipping the paper around, he found a graphite drawing—of the Phoenician academy itself, its glass structure, its uniform building. And what exactly made his hands clench, his grip tremor, was what remained of it. It was in flames, the fire drawn out of proportion, childish in a most disturbing way. He could see where the fire was—the classrooms it reached, he could envision it turning the night to day if he were to stand before it himself.

Blinking rapidly, Renzo hastily returned the drawing beneath the duvet and exited the room, endeavoring to forget what he had seen entirely. As he made his way back to Cornell and the old woman, passing by the staircase,

something flashing caught his eye. Pausing in his step, he spotted a vibrant red on the hand railing of the staircase, what appeared to be a bracelet of cheap, plastic red beads.

He had never seen them before, yet he could not help observing that they seemed out of place. As though guided by a most arbitrary and unreasonable curiosity, his fingers reached out to pick up the bracelet. Instantly, far before Renzo had realized the string was severed, the beads were thrust into the air, and in a most frightening symphony, scattered down the stairs. It was resonance and chaos intertwined—dozens of handheld metronomes set side by side to tick at their own law and liberty.

Renzo stood frozen, the string drifting to his feet, as he watched the red and white flash before his eyes. It was quick and it was over, but afterwards when Renzo attempted to move, to flex his fingers, he felt weak in the knee, pliant in the hand.

He did not notice Cornell land his hand on his shoulder. Jumping about and letting out a startled noise, he turned around to find the officer smiling at him apologetically. “Sorry ‘bout that. I know you’d like to get home soon, but it would do me a good favor if you could help assist the old woman down the stairs. She has signed all the documents.”

Nodding dully, he had half a mind to warn the both of them of the beads that had fallen down the stairs, but as he later supported the old woman by the arms, a step at a time, he found that all them were nowhere to be found.

***

The natural process of waking and falling asleep was, as she now observed, more similar than thought to be. Perhaps this was not so much as falling asleep as waking up, but in both outcomes there still would have lingered a line of restlessness, and a line of calm.

Noelle opened her eyes and saw lashes of grass curved in by the press of her head, and behind that a soft blue, appearing more watered out than she

could recall. It was day again, and beside her lay a friend, the two of them emerging from a slumber, and for one of them a most vivid dream.

For once, Noelle and her friend exchanged no words and then sat up and stood to their feet, embarking on a lazy stroll along a path, which had been plowed out in a straight line with no end in sight. The girl, for her part, showed no ill intention and lowered her head bashfully, waiting for Noelle to speak. She never did.

Or, 'never' was not quite the fitted term for it. It was true that time was not a concept that existed in either of their minds—or singular mind, should be said—but there was always, at the very least, absolution or nothing at all. And Noelle, for all that she remained silent, eventually spoke.

"I don't believe I'll ever reach it."

"Your peace of mind?"

"I don't like that term very much. It never describes what it actually is," said Noelle.

The girl glanced to the side. "You'd avoid definition to your end. Yet, a peace of mind, or whatever you're reaching for, is definition."

"I know that. But it is not as though I am able to do as I think, as I want. I cannot do nothing, for as long as I am doing nothing through resistance, it is then something."

"What you are saying—what you are saying of your principles, you are drawing lines, and therefore definition. You are avoiding definition, acting through definition, and striving for definition all at once. It's ridiculous, isn't it?" Noelle lowered her head and refused to answer.

Rather, she asked a genuine question of the girl. "And what of you? What can someone who spends their days in this field desire, what can they possibly want, past all logical qualms and reason?"

"You want the answer to a different question," replied the girl without accusation. "I don't believe you care about what it is that I want; I don't believe that you wonder of it very often. You'd like to know if there is anything I want at all. If it's possible for me to do so." In a moment of distraction, Noelle looked in the direction they headed, sure she had seen something in her

peripheral vision. However, all that lay before them were the two symmetrical fields spanning the horizon.

"I have no reason to lie to a friend," the girl continued. "I thought you ought to know who I am. I've been terribly lonely, you see, these past days, as the saying goes. Isolation never made me sad, but it never made me happy, either. I suppose it is instinctual for us to crave attention. And the only attention I ever received was a reflection of my own thought. Perhaps, if I were a little more—a little more transparent—then I could have found solace as it was, yet I was a hair short and am now as dependent on company as any other.

"I recall and I scheme. I am a cynic, a terrible cynic, and I am one of those who cannot trust, even though they have never been betrayed before." Noelle looked up at hearing these words. "There is no reason for me to be as such, but as you may have heard, reason was the most inaccurate invention to ever be born."

This time, as the two of them returned their gaze forward, they saw that they approached, placed squat in the middle of the plains, a navy mansion with stained-glass windows. Noelle felt an odd sense of familiarity.

"What does it mean," she asked the girl, "to recognize something you've never seen before?"

"False recognition? It's common, I think. It tends to happen most when you see something similar to something else you've seen in a dream before."

"Dreaming, you say?"

"Yes, dreaming."

The girl taking the lead, she led the both of them into the house, closing the door behind. The walls were bathed in colored light, the floorboards paneled and polished. The two of them continued further until reaching the dining room, at which they took a seat at a well-furnished mahogany table. From there, they talked of ordinary trifles, of the little things they desired but didn't need; they talked as any two friends would have talked on a slow, sleepy day.

And both of them were fully aware of when their talk simmered down, when they no longer talked as passionately as before. And it may have been when they reached the point of silence, sitting side by side in the dilapidated room, that Noelle resolved to bid her last goodbye.

"I've reached absolution," she said. "And even absolution doesn't feel as it is."

"Then, I'm sure you know what to do. Look for your god." The girl reached out to lace their hands firmly together, in the process handed Noelle a palmful of red beads. Letting go, Noelle brought them to the level of her eye to observe them, watching them roll about the contour of her hand. However, as she turned to thank the girl, she was nowhere to be found, the chair still pushed out, a ray of light from the window in her place.

From there, Noelle stood from the table, and headed down the hallway, exiting the mansion. It was slightly disorienting to find the sky as bright as before, her vision sensitive, but she did not bother to squint. Walking a fair distance into the plains, far enough that the mansion should have been no more than a blot in the horizon, she scattered the red beads around herself, carelessly.

This time around, there was no wind as the grass around her began to shift and make way for the stems of the trees. There was no darkening of the sky as the beads grew to stems and then to trunks. They encircled her wildly, their spindles forming by the hundreds at each branch, gradually drawing more and more lines across her view. Noelle caught a glimpse of the sun just as the last of it disappeared.

And eventually her entire body melded against each trunk of a tree, the seams folding in on themselves and fading completely. And when a fully grown Frauwood tree stood proud and firm, stretching thirty feet above the plains, and another ten above the mansion, still the wind did not start, and still the sun did not sink.

***

Tuesday, 03:32:42, Hurricane Alert.

May the janitor had taken care to replace the dangling lightbulb, may the winds had been less harsh and sent the tree careening towards the school a moment later, perhaps the lightning would not have reached the Phoenician, far less the classroom of Miss Karpel.

Yet, it was such the way it happened, the building unoccupied—besides the janitor groveling alone in the former bunker of the school, and it was he who felt the building tremor and a portion of the rubble and debris crumble off the sides, leaving a minorly damaged infrastructure. The janitor resolved to leave the library only when, after several minutes, he smelled a faint scent of sweet smoke.

And just as he rounded the corner towards the damaged end of the building, he caught a fleeting glance of scattered blue fire about the fallen posts just before the rain and wind snuffed it away. And, with no more fire before his eyes, he stood weakly, confirming this fact, then later scampered off, retreating back to the library.

Tuesday, 06:56:13, Status of Officer Maurice Cornell

As the storm had leveled off enough for the unofficial release of several search parties, Officer Maurice Cornell was located and accounted for, having during the storm resided safely inside an abandoned shop along with a student accomplice and elderly woman he had planned to escort to Shelter 2A.

The student was returned to his respective household, and the elderly woman was seen to immediate healthcare upon reaching the shelter. Officer Cornell has been pardoned from punishment for leaving his post due to the current state of affairs.

Friday, 13:31:33, Announcement Issued by Board of Port Octavia

Infrastructural repair is in progress and the town is predicted to remain in debt for min. 8 years. The board has agreed that following reprimands, the harbor of Port Octavia will be reopened for international trade once more.

An import tariff will be issued to keep trade primarily local before expanding further, with a goal of reaching full recovery. The board has seeked

aid from its nearest province senator, and expects that the structure of the board shall see to drastic changes in the following years—given the absence and inactivity of a third of members.

Shelters are currently available to all citizens, however entry is only permitted given the subject owns no personal possessions are all. The Phoenician Academy of Science will resume in two weeks, but student guardians are able to apply for student withdrawal within a ten-day window.

***

It was discovered, through perhaps the most humiliating way possible, that there had been no hurricane at all. Renzo was not quite sure how the entire town had arrived at the unanimous agreement that the passing storm, albeit a violent one, had been a full-fledged hurricane, even after the damage had been inspected.

Still a portion of the town was firmly set on the notion a hurricane had occurred, leaving their neighboring provinces ridiculing and mocking them in their papers—the most publicity Port Octavia may have received in years.

The remaining population of the town, upon realizing a hurricane had not really occurred, was split between returning to hiding or readopting the regular routine of their life post-"hurricane." Most chose the latter, even the unwilling, due to the disastrous financial situation of the town. Within several weeks, while the town had by no means fully recovered, the most populated regions of it had brushed up significantly.

And for Renzo himself, he felt as though a glaze had cleared from his eyes. The skies were no longer red and the weather resumed its regular pattern. He did not feel as though he had gained nor lost anything, but was tired in the mind as one feels when waking from a continuous and dream-ridden slumber. After school, he resumed his initial habit of taking the brisk way to the barbershop or his house without any detours.

He had not seen Noelle for such a period of time, her surreal and silent presence, that he began to suspect it had all never existed. He must have been

sick; terribly sick the past months, for now he was sure all his actions, which now seemed executed by a separate entity, had been under the influence of fever. And a fever of the past was, luckily, in no way relevant to the present day.

Here he stood in the silent classroom beside Professor Lithgow, hands folded behind his back, watching the pendulum-clock contraption. It was unmoving, the pendulum caught halfway in its movement, the sack of lead resting limp against the ground supported by its hooked string.

"Sir," Renzo addressed the professor. "You asked me to stay behind today."

The professor had his scrutinizing gaze fixed on the pendulum. He, too, seemed tired, exhausted not visibly but in the manner he waited longer than usual before responding. "Tell me, Renzo, this may strike you as an odd question at such a time, but do you believe it is possible to be between the state of living and death? An inanimate object is neither alive or dead, but is it, by any means possible, for a human to achieve the same state?"

In contrast to any previous questions Professor Lithgow had asked, this one left Renzo thoroughly perplexed. He did not reply instantly, and for all that he tried to gather the most reasonable answer, he could not bring himself to lie. And so he spared another round of thought, then said, "When you ask whether or not it is possible, do you ask in terms of theory or reality?"

The professor smiled a little. "Both. Tell me both."

Closing his eyes, Renzo began, "Well, if I was to be fully honest, I cannot be sure. If speaking scientifically—or should I say by our current *stage* of science—it would not be possible. It is not possible for a heart to cease its beating and for the blood to still and avoid decay."

"However?" Professor Lithgow prompted.

"However, removing scientific definition from the question, there is more room to discuss what exactly it means to be neither dead or alive. Most people would not consider something inanimate to be dead, even though it holds no more life than something dead, for it was never alive in the first place. And that is where the line ought to end, for your question implies that the

subject in question starts out alive, yet—" Renzo broke off momentarily, then resumed in a small voice. "Once again, if we are taking scientific definition out of the question, now it can be inquired what it means to exist, and whether anything, any of this, ever existed at all."

"Congratulations." Professor Lithgow clapped slowly. And when Renzo reopened his eyes, he saw the professor was not mocking him, but neither did he appear to be truly congratulating him, for the wrinkles and creases of his face were stretched in a smile ever so hollow and dead and satisfied.

This time, Renzo lowered his head and did not yet leave, for he knew the professor always had something to add.

"And Renzo, I must tell you—and know that I mean this in no ill way, but it is truly a shame your friend never quite achieved what they wanted." Renzo clenched his fists, nodded, then exited the classroom.

He failed to observe anything around himself as he took the quickest route home. He walked at a moderate pace, and did not appear upset or hurt in any way. Really, he was not upset, nor was he hurt. He was only tired and no more, and after hearing the professor's parting words, he could muster no more effort to react.

Despite all this, as he entered his house, he walked straight for his mother and embraced her deeply, then began to cry softly and bitterly. And, within his chest stirred a fear—a great fear that it had all, every bit of it, never happened.

Epilogue

A sudden tumble of rock and water in the gutter, along the main road came forth a well-sprung carriage, its wheels a blur, its rattle nonetheless minimal. It was midday yet the weather appeared fair enough for one to have mistaken it for the morning. And so this carriage traversed along the thin terrain, the surrounding greenery growing thinner and sparser with distance, and making its steady approach towards Port Octavia.

Within the carriage were seated two men, one of them a passenger and the other up front holding the reins, an idle whip in his left hand. While their conversation had been light and airy the past couple of days, now they spoke little to none, partially due to the roar of the gravel beneath the wheels, and rest due to the thick tension in the air.

On the coachman's lap rested a soiled sheet of paper which appeared to have been ripped out of a cheap literary journal, and would have had no reason to be kept if not for what was on the other side of it. As of late, he could hardly bear to look at it.

Within a couple of hours, they officially entered the town, greeted by a makeshift post and signs with warnings of debris and construction. From here, the smell of salt and urine was already tangible in the air. They slowed their pace upon entering the more populated region of the town, small stalls set up by the dozens appearing to be selling the most miscellaneous of things.

They encountered a few beggars, attracted by what seemed a wealthy gentlemen seated in the back, but none made any move to stop their journey. The carriage went on a little farther, turning into a residential neighborhood, before halting before a communal building, in which outside there waited a familiar old woman supported by her young landlady. The old woman wore her hair down, appearing almost unrecognizable to how she had been a year ago.

Fixing the carriage in place with the push of a pedal, the coachman warily stepped off onto the sidewalk, helping his companion down the steps

before turning to the old woman. “I received your letter,” he said in a weak voice, removing the cap from his head.

The old woman nodded. “Humphrey?” she asked quietly.

“As healthy as ever the last time I saw him,” replied the coachman. “He misses her, though.” In his left hand the coachman gripped the sheet of paper tensely.

“Alaya?” the old woman further questioned.

To this, the coachman only shook his head, the features of his handsome face twisting into something grim. “Shall we be off?” he managed.

To his surprise, the old woman shook her head. “Not yet. More said they would come.” As she finished those very words, from behind approached a double set of footsteps, two boys running in their direction. The coachman turned and saw them both out of breath, one of them nodding towards the old woman in greeting.

He attempted to address them. “Nice to meet you. You were … friends of Noelle?” For a moment, neither responded.

“Yes. Yes, we were.”

From there, the party set off away from the neighborhood, across the alleys and towards the Phoenician Academy. They headed around the perimeter of the school and down a gravel trail. Rounding a thicket of shrubs, they then made their way up the hill, at this point in time, the old woman completely supported by her landlady.

And when the hill leveled off, they neared a dark looming structure, a broken windmill with its blades removed and set off to the side. Against the structure were laid several bundles of flowers left by anonymous teachers or students, or perhaps even several of those present in the party. There even seemed to be a small card, a watercolor painting, tied to one of the bundles.

“They never found her,” explained the old woman to the coachman’s companion, who appeared confused. “This is not so much a funeral as it is a gathering.” For a while they all stood, dwelling in stagnant thought, before the old woman spoke once more. “There is something I think everybody here ought to know. While not everyone has ever met Noelle”—she glanced

towards the coachman's companion—"the rest of us hardly knew much more in the first place. For myself, in the course of the last year, I learned more of her than perhaps the past decade combined.

"In case you were unaware, she spent the majority of her childhood in the isolated great plains, roughly six hundred miles into the mainland. Alaya raised her as any mother should have, and Noelle grew up clothed, fed, and blind to violence and sin. She was neither spoiled nor mistreated, she was raised as all children ought to be raised. So, how, exactly, did she end up in such a way?

"I'm sure that if we were to ask the late Alaya Favre, she would renounce all her early beliefs and claim inherent corruption in all humans. However, for myself, I cannot even distinguish or define 'corruption' at this point. There is no point in giving it a name when you hardly know what it is. That is what I believe Noelle would have said.

"But, let us all, for a moment, entertain Alaya's ideal in her own respect. Say that 'corruption' *was* inherent in all humans, maintained in the strongholds of urban settlement—in that case, anything inherent, applying to all, is no longer relevant to observation. If everyone is corrupted, then so be it, for it loses all its meaning. If everyone perceives a little differently, if nobody truly understands another, then none of us are friends, and all of us are friends.

"As for Noelle," the old woman continued, voice softening, "I think she was a little too intuitive for her own good. She saw no value in her life; she saw it as an experiment of sorts, as an entertainment of her curiosities. And for those that think even remotely like her, they are bound to live a miserable life, dancing in circles around the rationale they were raised to think with." The old woman's speech had begun bold and boisterous, but now it had simmered down and everyone present felt it only appropriate to lower their heads.

Over the course of the next hour, flowers were placed about the windmill, and quiet conversation gradually trickled back amongst the adults. Everyone in the party that had once met or known or heard of Noelle, briefly chipped in a response. Each of their answers led only to more questions, and by the end of the gathering it became clear how little was known of the girl.

At some point, when all the adults continued farther in their banter, talking of the earlier days of Noelle's childhood, Renzo stepped away and no longer listened. In truth, he had shared very little of what he knew of Noelle. Yet sharing any of it would have felt wrong, disrespectful to the rest of their perceptions of Noelle—for, from his perspective, she was the pinnacle of something that never existed at all.

He sensed Kolya walking to his side. For a moment, they exchanged no words and only watched the darkening sky. "I've got something important to say," started Kolya. He wrung his hands, unsure of how to begin. "I'm not quite sure when, but I'll be leaving soon back home. With Ihya."

"Ah," responded Renzo, feeling a little hurt in his chest. "I'm sure your family misses you."

"They do," confirmed Kolya rather awkwardly. He took care to continue before the conversation could end. "I'll write, if that's alright with you."

"Yeah. I'd like that. I'd really like that." Renzo was surprised to find he had more to say. "In fact, if I ever find a chance in the future, I'd like to go visit where you live. With my mother, of course." Kolya smiled at that.

"I'd like that too." With that, the two friends took a seat on the grass, and waited out the rest of the night in odd spirit, pondering where the lines were to be drawn between their desires and means, and whether, if put to the mind and the mind only, there existed any at all.

THE END.